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Violet Evergarden

vol.2

by Akatsuki Kana

[Novel Updates](#)

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I like flowers. I like poems. But what I enjoy writing about the most are battle depictions. I want to become strong. I took Violet's name from a poem I love, "Roses are Red". People's names always have some sort of meaning.

—Akatsuki Kana

When had that feeling sprouted within him? He had no idea what the trigger had been. If he were ever asked what he was fond of about her, he would not be able to properly express it in words.

"Major." Before he had realized it, he was happy whenever she called out to him. He believed he had to protect her as she followed him from behind. His chest pounded with immutable devotion.

—*For whom and for what purpose is that devotion? Supposing hers is for my sake... her lips would automatically only speak words that sound pleasing to me. Since she seeks subservience and orders, having the approval of the Lord she submits to is her motivation. Then... what about my own life? What about my love? For whose sake are they?*

Chapter 7: The Major and His Everything

Emerald eyes opened. They belonged to a small child. The wide-open orbs of a young infant who had yet to complete six years of age and had just awoken from his slumber reflected the world around him.

As he hopped off the carriage he had been sleeping in along the course of the road, a summery scenery spread in front of him. The first thing that caught his attention was the beauty of the trees lined up on the way to a green forest. While nestled close to one another, from old ones to saplings, they stood dignified. The shadows formed by a soft, pure light cascading to the earth from the gaps between their leaves almost looked like dancers. Said leaves swayed in the wind, sounding like the giggles of little girls.

During such season, white flowers blown into a storm of petals were a remarkable trait of Leidenschaftlich. Almost as the blizzards of the northern countries, the flowers floated about in the air. Their vines were associated with heroes who had protected the nation against no trivial number of invasions, and could be found planted all over the country. Beautiful blossoms bloomed from them during the change from spring to summer.

“It’s our family flower.” His father whispered that one sentence, walking ahead of him.

His eyes, which had been moving about in many directions as he was led by his older brother’s hand, landed on his father’s back. Perhaps sensing his son’s thermal stare, the father turned around once, and though he could not tell, it could have been to confirm if he was properly following from behind. Same as his young self, his father’s irises were green, except of a slightly different shade, and bore a strict gaze.

Just from the fact his father had turned backwards, he was happy to the point of wanting to break into dance. Most likely, that was idolization. However, although his heart was pleased, his expression was stiff. All he was concerned about was whether he had done anything warrant being admonished during that instant.

“What’s that stuff... about ‘our family flower’?” His older brother poorly imitated their father’s words in a very low tone.

The parent and children followed down the green path. Beyond the scene created by the beauty of nature was what seemed to be an area for military training facilities. In it were several people who wore the same purplish black uniform as their father. The little one acted as though exploring something peculiar, and what lay before his pupils that twinkled with stars of curiosity was the figure of soldiers in a march that did not disarray for a single second.

The father took his sons to what seemed to be seats for authorized people in order to watch something that was about to start. Leaving them on chairs arranged outdoors, the father left their side.

In addition to those who wore the army’s uniform, there were also soldiers wearing the navy’s white high-collar one. Surrounding the fighter and reconnaissance planes, they chatted amongst one another, cleanly divided into two parties. Although both were defense forces, they appeared to be self-conscious of and unfriendly with each other. From the eyes of a child, it was a bizarre sight.

Perhaps becoming nervous due to not seeing his father anywhere, he flapped his arms and legs, aimlessly dropping his gaze to his feet. A petal of bougainvillea, which his father had called their “family flower”, fell down. As he stretched his hand out in a forceful attempt to take it into his palm while remaining seated, his older brother sitting next to him held his body back down.

“Gilbert, behave.” As his brother told him with a sullen tone, Gilbert tamely complied.

He was an obedient child. His home was Leidenschaftlich, and he was the descendant of a well-known southern military nation’s heroes.

For the Bougainvillea men, it was customary to enlist into the army. It was not the first time that his father, who had a high-ranking position in it, had brought his brother and himself to similar events.

His brother grasped his hand and held it tight. Even without him doing so, Gilbert was not the kind of boy to repeat an action after being scolded for it.

"If you disgrace the Bougainvillea name, I will be the one punished for neglecting my duty of supervising you."

Since his brother receiving a lecture along with a reprimanding fist from their father was something often witnessed in their everyday routine, it was only the expected for him to show a well-attuned response, as to not spoil their father's mood. Gilbert understood that much.

In the Bougainvillea household, where Gilbert and his older brother lived, each person had to act out their conduct with utmost care; otherwise, it felt as if the house's walls, protruding with needles, nails, swords, and rose thorns, would pierce their bodies and draw blood. Rather than it being a comfortable place, it was as if it judged them constantly. Such was their home.

"So boring..." his brother said, half-pouting. His eyes were directed not at the army soldiers, but at the navy ones. "This kind of thing... seems boring, doesn't it, Gil?"

Although Gilbert was asked for agreement, he was at loss for an answer. He could not consent.

—*Why do you say that?*

He believed feelings such as boredom had to be discarded in that situation. Regardless of how tedious it could be, they had to endure it. That was why he had ceased acting as a restless child who was easily influenced by others. His brother was supposed to be aware of that as well, so why did he go as far as orally seeking concordance?

Since Gilbert was still only an infant, he replied in a child-like manner, "You can't say things like that."

"It's fine. It's okay for you and me to talk about this in a low voice. As if I would let even my thoughts be controlled. Y'know, Gil... this is definitely... something that Dad and Dad's father, and even Dad's father's father have done. It's the worst, right?"

"Why is that bad?" Gilbert asked.

"Isn't it as if they don't have a will of their own? Listen, the reason Dad has brought us here today is to say, 'you are going to become like me'."

"Why is that bad?" Gilbert asked.

"It's to make us understand that we can't choose anything other than this."

"Why is that bad?" Gilbert asked.

As he did not comprehend his brother's feelings no matter what, the latter seemed frustrated and annoyed, lightly balling a fist and strongly hitting Gilbert's shoulder with the hand that had been holding his. "I want to become a sailor. Not just any sailor. A captain. I'd lead my comrades and venture all around the world. I also want my own ship. Gil, you're a good learner so you could become a voyager too. But... I... **we** will never be allowed to become what we want."

"Isn't that obvious?" Gilbert said, "Since we are from the Bougainvillea family."

The household was neatly composed of a pyramidal hierarchy where the father stood at the top; beneath him was the mother, uncle and aunt, and beneath them was the oldest brother, Gilbert and their sisters. In the house Gilbert had been born into, it was natural for the lesser people to lower their heads to their elders, and opposing them was not tolerated. Gilbert and his brother were little gears meant to give continuity to the Bougainvillea family by protecting its heroic honor. Could gears proclaim what they wished to do? No, they could not.

"You've been... completely brainwashed, huh..." With a voice that hinted pity, his brother whispered in disdain.

—*I wonder what... 'brainwash' is.*

While he was lost in thought, the fighter planes took flight. In order to see the iron birds rendezvousing and drawing arcs in the sky, Gilbert looked up towards the heavens. The planes intersected with the Sun and disappeared for a moment. It was incredibly dazzling. However, his eyeballs ached as if burning, causing him to close his lids slowly.

Perhaps due to the stimulation from the sunlight, tears had formed.

Emerald eyes opened. They belonged to a wise young man. The orbs that

bore sternness taken after not only his father but also perhaps his own personality, as well as kindness and loneliness, were staring at a doll. Rather, a girl that looked like a doll. In the corners of his field of vision was the figure of his older brother, who had grown up just as Gilbert himself.

The room was filled with refined decorations. They were expensive arrangements. However, the fact that the fine quality of the ornaments was the criteria to decide who could afford staying in the place was laughable.

Everything was a mess. The room had become the murder scene of five men at once. The girl, bloodstained, was the culprit. Even with her clothes and scent washed in blood, her beauty remained undamaged by it. She was the most beautiful assassin in the world.

“Hey, you’ll take it, right, Gilbert?” putting on an amicable smile, his older brother pushed the girl’s back.

She took a step towards Gilbert’s side. Automatically, Gilbert took a step back. His body had moved reflexively in refusal and fear. She was horrifying.

—*Don’t look at me.*

His brother had relentlessly insisted that the girl in front of him was a ‘tool’ and forcefully handed her over. Indeed, she was treated and acted as a tool. However, her breathing was still heavy.

While he wiped her hand, sticky with blood and fat, with his cufflink, she stared at him as though inquiring what the next command would be.

—*Why are you looking at me?*

He empathized with his older brother’s inhumane utterances to a certain extent. The pyramidal hierarchy existed not only in their home but also in society. In order for children, who were at the bottom of it, to ascend to its top, efforts were required. And not simply by one’s own power. So as to live, so as to be successful in life, it was necessary to make use of a variety of assets. It was not something to be praised for, yet it was something Gilbert desired. Undoubtedly, if he learned how to properly use her, she could become the best shield and sword.

—*Why are you... looking at me?*

The automated assassin doll desired Gilbert as well.

In the end, everything had gone as his brother had planned, and the young Gilbert, who still had features that could be considered that of a youth, stood in the middle of a street downtown. His two orbs of a mysterious hue stared at the one his arms. The doll, wrapped in his jacket, smelled of nothing remotely sweet, instead enveloped in the odor of the blood she had just bathed in. If she had monster-like features, he would have expected that much, yet her appearance was akin to that of a pixie from some fairytale.

“I am... scared of you.”

The girl did not react to the honest words that leaked from his lips. Her blue eyes simply watched him.

“I am... I am scared of... using you.” Gilbert continued while embracing her tightly. “You are terrifying. Right now, in fact... it’s possible that I’m actually supposed to kill you.” Muttering painfully, he never let go of the girl. He also did not attempt to drop and leave her on the road, shoot her head with the gun in his pocket, or squeeze her slender neck with his hands. “But... I want you to live.” He held onto her despite his fears. His words were frank. “I want you to live.”

It was a truth that shone faintly amidst a cruel world. The problem was whether they would be able to endure its harsh reality. Could he do it?

Uncertain, Gilbert closed his eyes. He prayed for the idealistic thought that it would be wonderful if everything were solved once he opened them again.

Emerald eyes opened. A situation far worse than when he had been praying unfolded before them. The girl proceeded to murder men who had become unable to move by spanking their heads with batons. She would hit them. Blood would fly. Screams would rise. She would hit them. The one who had ordered so was Gilbert himself.

Something other than life was being lost in that space. Violence was giving birth to something in place of reasoning, conscience and other values that had been given names by someone. It was...

—*Suspicious. This is not for justice. For her, mine and this country’s sake...*

that's what this was meant for.

A little bit of pleasure was born within Gilbert amidst enough guilt to make him want to vomit, along with a lust for conquest from getting his hands on an overwhelming power – which was a girl who would not listen to the orders of anyone but him –, and a sense of superiority as though he had taken over the world.

With the justification of escorting her to the spare room that she had been given, he temporarily excused himself and escaped from the circle of superior officers coming to ask questions regarding the girl. Stepping onto the pool of blood of the people she had slaughtered, he headed for her.

It was as if she would make blood come out of whatever she touched. The blood of her victims, that is. Never her own. Yet her current image seemed to be a copy of one Gilbert would probably see again someday, of her completely covered in blood. That was what he was attempting to do.

The feelings that had abruptly risen within him were gone, like a candle being extinguished. Her breathing was heavy once more.

—There's no helping. There's no helping it. Gilbert told himself.

Indeed, it was a decision that could not be helped. There was nothing that could be done, as it was only the expected of him to want to keep the frightening weapon he had acquired, which possessed awareness, within his view. He feared she would harm others. In such circumstances, it was best to use her while maintaining her at reach, and the tool herself wished for that as well.

—It can't be helped... in order for us... to be together. For her to stay alive.

Even so, the insides of his eyes hurt exactly as the time he had stared directly into the Sun.

Gilbert took the girl to a deserted corridor.

She was a tool. Not his daughter or little sister. She was someone soon to become his underling. It would be troublesome if other people perceived their peculiar relationship. Unless they kept a distance, they would not be able to live side-by-side.

—Still...

He made her walk, walk and walk. Once no one else was on sight, he turned around and stretched his hand towards her.

“Come.”

He could not hold back. The fact that his uniform would be soiled with blood did not go through his head. He had to hold her at that very moment, moving automatically to embrace her. When they had first met and when he had taken her with him, he had ended up doing so as well.

The girl had the same reaction. She trembled agitatedly, but unlike the other times, her tiny fingers gripped onto his uniform – firmly, as though to say she would not let go.

She was a living being with temperature and weight. Back when his sisters were babies, he used to carry and soothe them often. The feeling of those days overlapped. She was soft, as if she could break, to the point of making Gilbert believe he had to protect her no matter what. She fit in his arms more perfectly than he had first thought.

His face, distorted with extreme sorrow, reflected in her blue eyes. Grieviously, Gilbert whispered, “Do you really want... a Master like this?”

He could not directly face the excessively innocent glow of the girl’s eyes, and closed his own as if to run away.

Emerald eyes opened.

“I cannot comprehend... what you are saying.” Even though he was still at an age where one would be complimented for their youthfulness, his precocious orbs showed exasperation as he stared at a telecommunication equipment.

It was raining outside. The sound of droplets pouring onto the building interfered with the conversation. Everywhere was too noisy.

Gilbert, commanding the Special Offense Force of Leidenschaftlich’s Army, carried the duty of traveling around the country to terminate the various conflicts happening in it. Moreover, he had the role of raising the one who would become the strength of the Raid Unit in the upcoming final battle. In

addition to that, he had suddenly received one more job.

“About the location, a driver has been arranged to take her there. Prepare her and order her to kill. Just that will suffice. Eliminate everyone living in that building. She’s not to worry about anything else and should come back as soon as she’s done.”

Having unexpectedly received a message from a superior officer during his stay at the army divisions’ base, he opposed to the contents of the operation. “But...!” although he had waited for his turn to talk, he closed his mouth after raising his voice. “If this is meant to put disturbing elements under control, my entire troop should participate. Why are you pushing this mission onto Violet alone...? It’s not something a single soldier could do.” He was unable to subdue the disapproval dripping from his tone.

“It’s because the least people who know about this, the better. The target is a national arms dealer who signed an exportation contract for an anti-government organization. This has been reported by a spy who infiltrated in it. We can’t leave the matter to be solved by itself. After all, they are quite aware of our blemishes. The moment is opportune. We must settle this. It’s regretful to call it an overthrow, but there are certainly many people who will take it that way. If we end up exposing to the world even the dubious ideals we embrace, this will be of importance.”

“If that is the case, then all the more reason to assemble personnel capable of accomplishing the mission.”

“Which is your doll. A killer weapon who desires only your orders without questioning them. There’s no one more capable than her, right? I haven’t forgotten that spectacle you presented to us. How many did she murder back then again? How old was she? With your guidance, the precision of her killings should have improved even further. I won’t let you say she can’t do it. Rather, if you had to pick between her doing it or not, which would it be?”

“That’s...”

“Could the most prominent symbol of national defense that is the Bougainvillea be a fake?”

Unable to speak properly, Gilbert clutched his clothes on the area next to his

lungs. During the few seconds of silence, an image surfaced in his mind of himself commanding Violet to complete the aforementioned task. She surely would reply with an obsequious “yes”. There would be no hesitation. She was not one to falter. If it were something Gilbert ordered, if it were for the sake of the Lord who looked after her, she would do anything. And what distressed Gilbert the most was that Violet would probably execute her role without difficulties.

He then pictured the future he had predicted in his head. Within it, he could see himself unable to sleep in the barracks, simply awaiting her return.

“She can do it.” His voice finally came out. “She can do it, but Violet needs specific on-site directions. If you have witnessed the slaughter of back then, you understand that, right? She cannot function as a weapon unless I give instructions. Allow me to accompany her.”

It had finally come out, but not with what he had wanted to say.

“Violet, are you ready?” clad in his purplish black military uniform, Gilbert gazed down at the girl with his emerald green eyes. They seemed intense in the dark interior of the vehicle.

Besides his own, the only other pair of orbs that glistened blazingly was the girl’s. As to expand her field of vision, her golden hair, which complimented her beautiful eyes of a color lighter than the blue of the sea and deeper than the blue of the sky, was tied inside of a military hat identical to the one Gilbert wore.

“Yes.” Her curt response was dispassionate yet brimming with confidence. The girl who could not speak was no longer there.

Gilbert handed a knife and handgun to the female soldier of a rare beauty. “We are going there with the pretense of just talking, but that is not our intention. What we are about to do... will serve as example to all arms dealers involved with Leidenschaftlich.”

“I am aware.”

“The inside is not spacious enough for big fights. I want you to adapt to the conditions of this battleground as fast as possible. You can’t use Witchcraft. But

I will go in as well. I will protect you. Think only of defeating the enemies.”

“Yes, Major.” As she nodded, no matter how one looked at her, she did not give off the slightest impression that she was about to kill people. Her slim shoulders and delicate physique indicated her to be in her mid-teens or somewhere below.

Gilbert glanced at her despondently and left the car. It was pitch-black outside. A night sky without stars created a serene atmosphere.

“It will take no more than thirty minutes. Wait here.”

After he informed the driver, the two of them stepped into the property that interposed two alleys. In front of the place that did not appear to have any irregularities was a hard-faced man guarding the gates, holding a rifle as though for display.

There were several houses nearby, but none of them had lights on. It seemed to be an abandoned residential area at the back of a housing district deep within a suburban town. There was a reason why no one lived in it anymore – no normal family would wish to be in a neighborhood reeking of blood and violence.

“I am an affiliate of Leidenschaftlich’s army, Major Gilbert Bougainvillea. I’ve come to see the arms dealer. I know he is here. Tell him I have something to discuss.”

The gatekeeper evidently showed a face of displeasure at the sudden visitors. “Aah...? What’s with you guys? Don’t fuck around. Who do you think you’re talking to?”

At the unbecoming attitude of spitting on his shoes, Gilbert remained expressionless while muttering, “You should watch your language as well.”

With a quick action, he held down the gatekeeper’s rifle in one hand, simultaneously sinking a fist into the other’s stomach. He then pointed the rifle to the top of the groaning gatekeeper’s head, hitting him with it. It did not end there; the instant the latter fell onto his knees, Gilbert landed a kick on the side of his face with his military shoes. A large amount of blood and a crowned tooth spilled from the gatekeeper’s mouth. Gilbert glared coldly as he shouted in

agony with yelps and grunts. His ruthlessness had increased from thrashing the man's profile.

"Disappear. I will use a gun next time."

The order was for them to murder all of those in the building. They were not inside of it yet. He had let the other live due to mercy. However, a few seconds after the man fled, the girl accurately shot his head with her gun as he ran away. The hand of the man that had been shot held a hidden revolver.

"Violet."

"Major, he was aiming a gun at you."

A few minutes after the two entered the building, vicious gunshots and shrieks echoed like music pieces. Sounds of bursting flesh and breaking glass, cries of deathly agony. They were played in a timed harmony and went on repeatedly, until at last, the brutal pursue came to an end with a particularly lurid scream. The building that was the only source of light in the area eventually lost its gleam and its interior became completely quiet.

The world had finally regained its true form. It was a time of silence where living beings would fall into deep sleep.

"How dull." Loading his pistol, which had gone out of bullets, Gilbert sighed and sat down on a sofa. The legs of the bodies lying on the floor were on his way, but he ignored them as there was nothing else he could do.

It was Violet that the superior officers had nominated to take care of the arms dealer. She was actually supposed to have come to that place on her own.

—She already handles enemy soldiers, but now she has to do even this kind of dirty work. The higher-ups are treating her as nothing but a murder tool.

If the disposal of troublesome elements was for their country's sake, he could do it free of obscure thoughts. Had he been by himself, he would not have been thinking such things.

"Major, is something wrong? The mission has been cleared. There are no survivors." Even in such a situation, the girl in question checked the corpses with a calm face.

Gilbert knew better than anyone that there was no need to accompany her.

“No.” As he let his gaze wander around the floor, the feet of a man he had killed came into view. Disturbed, he averted his eyes. “I am fine. You’re tired, right? Take a seat too.”

As he gestured to the sofa, she wavered slightly but obediently sat down. It was a strange scene – a man and a girl relaxingly taking their time in a room filled with dead bodies. The blissfully striking moonlight poured from the window and illuminated the two felons.

Violet observed her superior – rather, someone whom she considered far more than just her superior – as he refused to look at her. What was the owner of those blue eyes thinking? It was as if she saw nothing else but him; such was the kind of stare that she regarded him with.

“Is it all right to not leave immediately?”

“Just one more minute and we’re off. Once we are out of here, we will return to the barracks and to our traveling routine. We will exterminate the enemy units as the higher-ups tell us to, travel again, and exterminate.”

“Yes.”

“There’s... very little extra time for me to spend... just with you.”

“Yes.”

“Even though we’ve been together since you were small, lately, it’s only at times like these that...”

“Yes.”

He felt as if his throat would clog with sorrow. It was the product of feelings that did not match his cool-headed outline. They were all brought by the girl sitting next to him. That was because the one who raised and managed that cold-blooded female soldier was Gilbert himself. He who directly used her as an assassination tool was in no position to berate others.

“Hum, Violet... sorry, but could you open the window? The smell of blood is terrible.”

After sounds of her stepping onto the pools of blood on the ground ensued,

the window was opened. Although it was a starless, dim night, the moon was now out. Exposed to the moonlight, her frame reflected hazily in Gilbert's eyes. Her beautiful facial features were already fully developed, despite her still being so juvenile. Blood droplets had splattered on her white cheeks, tainting her pure appearance.

"Major?" Perhaps uncomfortable from being stared at so intently, Violet tilted her neck at Gilbert.

"Violet, you've become taller again." His voice came out hoarse. He covered his head with his arms folded against his knees. Whenever he looked at her increasingly gorgeous figure, an indescribable pain would boil in his chest.

"Is that so? If Major says so, it might be true."

"Do you have any injuries?" It was not easy for him to speak without stuttering.

"No. Major, are you all right?"

"Do you despise me?" As he spoke as if spewing blood, the girl blinked in surprise. She must have been truly shocked.

After a while of silence, she replied in a low voice, as though whispering, "I do not understand the question."

To Gilbert, that had been a predictable response. A dry smile naturally came to him.

"Have I... failed at something?"

"No, that's not it. There's nothing you're at fault for."

"If there is anything wide of the mark, please tell me. I will fix it."

Her figure as she took the posture of a tool no matter what was hard to bear for Gilbert.

—However, I have no right to think that this is sad or that she is pitiable.

It was hard, yet he had no means to escape from that suffering.

"Violet, there's nothing you're at fault for. It's true. If there's anything to be criticized, it's the fact that you are by my side, killing people without hesitation

for my sake. And the one to blame for all of this is me.”

Violet did not possess a sense of good and bad from the start. She did not 'know' what could be considered righteous or erroneous. She merely chased after the adult who gave her orders.

“Why is that? I am Major’s weapon. It is merely obvious that you would use me.”

It was because Violet's words held no lies that each note of each one pierced Gilbert's whole body. She was simply a tool for massacre, devoid of emotions.

“Anyhow... I’m the one to blame. I don’t want you to be doing this. Still, I make you do it.”

Regardless of how beautiful she was, regardless of how much the man by her side held her dear...

“To me, you are not a tool...”

...she was a doll devoid of feelings...

“Not a tool...”

...that wished only for orders.

Gilbert wanted to shout. He had probably wanted to do so ever since he was a child, had he been allowed to. Had he been permitted freedom, without having to care about being well-behaved, the truth was that he had always, always, always, always, always wanted to shout, "As if I could conform to something like this."

could conform to something like this. As if I could conform to something like this. Aah, aah, as if I could conform to something like this!

When had that feeling sprouted within him?

—*Why at such a time?*

He had no idea what the trigger had been.

—*Why her?*

If he were ever asked what he was fond of about her, he would not be able to properly express it in words.

—*Anyone else would have been fine.*

“Major.” Before he had realized it, he was happy whenever she called out to him.

—*Even so, my eyes chase after and search for you.*

He believed he had to protect her as she followed him from behind.

—*My lips...*

His chest pounded with immutable devotion.

—*...feel like they will blurt out “I love you”.*

After acknowledging that he loved her, he ceased attempting to drag her into

war.

—*For whom and for what purpose is that devotion? Supposing hers is for my sake... her lips would automatically only speak words that sound pleasing to me. Since she seeks subservience and orders, having the approval of the Lord she submits to is her motivation. Then...*

“I... You...”

—*What about my own life?*

“You...”

—*For whose sake...*

“You...”

—*...is my love?*

“Violet...”

—*For whose sake... am I living now?*

“What is ‘love’?”

“Violet, love is...”

At that moment, he understood everything.

—*Aah.*

Gilbert was not keen of that phrase.

—*It was fate.*

After all, it would wipe clean every effort he had spent so far. He could not conform to the fact that the experiences stacked from since his tender years, as a child aiming to rise to the pyramid’s apex, had been for the sake of fate. Everything should have been the result of sheer effort. Nevertheless, at death’s doorstep, Gilbert understood.

—*It was fate.*

The reason why he had been born into the Bougainvillea family...

—*It was fate.*

The reason why his brother had abandoned him and cut ties with their household...

—*It was fate.*

The reason why said brother had found her and brought her home with him...

—*It was fate.*

The reason why Gilbert wound up loving her...

—*It was fate.*

“Violet.”

—*Just... teaching what love is... to this girl who doesn't know it. That is my life's purpose.*

“I do not understand. I don't understand love. I don't understand... the things Major talks about. If this is how it is, for what reason have I been fighting? Why did you give me orders? I am... a tool. Nothing else. Your tool. I do not understand love... I just... want to save... you, Major. Please do not leave me on my own. Major, please do not leave me on my own. Please give me an order! Even if it costs my life... please order me to save you!”

—*I love you, Violet. I should have... told you this... more properly in words. The many gestures you would show, the way your blue eyes would widen whenever you discovered something new... I enjoyed watching you like that. Flowers, rainbows, birds, insects, snow, fallen leaves and cities filled with shaking lanterns... I'd wanted to show them all to you in a more beautiful light. I'd wanted to bestow you with a moment to appreciate them freely, not with mine but your own thoughts. I don't know... how you would have lived without me there. But, if I weren't around, wouldn't you have been able... to see the world in a slightly more beautiful manner, the same way as I saw it through you? Ever since you came to my side, I... my life... was pretty much destroyed, but... I've found a meaning for living other than aiming for the top of that pyramid. Violet. You have... become my everything. Everything. Unrelated to the Bougainvillea. Just... everything to the man named Gilbert. At first, I was afraid of you. Yet at the same time, I believed I wanted to protect you. Even though you had sinned without realizing, I still wished for you to live. After I decided to*

make use of you, a criminal, I became a criminal as well. Your wrongdoings were my wrongdoings. I loved that mutual sinning. That's right, I should... have told you this. It's something very rare. I have very few things that I like. There's actually a much bigger number of things that I detest. I simply don't say it, but I'm not fond of this world, or this lifestyle. I do protect my country, but in truth, I dislike this world. The things I like are... my best friend, my inevitably twisted family... and you. Violet, it's only you. My life consisted of just that. Wanting to protect you... and trying to keep you alive... were the first things in my life that I had wanted to do no matter what out of my own will. Abjectly, I make this wish. Violet. I want... to protect... you... more, more and more.

An emerald eye opened. It was a world of darkness. The cries of insects could be heard from afar.

Was that the real world or not?

As he picked the smell of medicine, he immediately knew he was in a hospital. Gilbert confirmed his situation. He was lying on a bed.

His memory gradually returned. He was supposed to have died in the battlefield. However, perhaps because he had been praying so miserably, even though God had never granted any of his wishes until now, He had let him live.

Only one of his emerald eyes had opened. Regardless of how hard he tried, the eye from the side that was wrapped in bandages did not budge. He wanted to move his arms to touch it, as to check on whatever had happened to it. However, again, only one of the limbs moved.

He wondered who had done it. He now had a mechanical arm.

Gilbert turned his face to the side. He met with someone's eyes in the dark. It was a redhead man.

"You're... pretty resilient."

The only man in Gilbert's life whom the latter called "best friend" was there. He looked exhausted. What had happened to his uniform? He was dressed in a shirt and pants.

"Same... for... you." As he retorted huskily, his friend laughed.

He laughed, but it morphed into sobs right after. Gilbert thought it was a pity that he could not properly see his friend's crying face with only one side of his vision.

"What about Violet?"

His friend definitely knew beforehand that such a question would be asked. He shifted the chair he was sitting on and showed the bed next to him. The girl Gilbert loved lay there.

"If... she is... dead... then please kill me too."

With her eyes closed, she looked like a sculpture, making it impossible to discern if she was alive or not. His friend gently told him that she had survived, but her arm was no longer usable.

"Just... one... of them?"

"No, both. Both sides... now have artificial arms."

Gilbert forcefully attempted to stand up. While his friend rushed to warn against doing so, Gilbert borrowed his hand, walking the insignificant distance to the girl's bed with trembling legs. As he uncovered her thin blankets, her smooth porcelain-like arms existed no more. In their place were combat-specialized prosthetics, even though one could not say if she would fight again.

Who had put them on her?

Gilbert touched Violet's prosthetic with his flesh hand. It was cold. What was supposed to be there was gone. More than with his own condition, he had to bear with that.

"Major. What should I do with this... now that I have it?"

The arms she had showed him the emerald brooch with were gone.

"Major."

The hands that had grabbed onto Gilbert's cufflink as to not be separated from him were gone. They would never return.

"I want... to listen... to Major's orders. If I... have Major's orders... I can go... anywhere."

What she had lost would never come back to her.

Gilbert's vision blurred with tears to the point he could not see his beloved girl anymore. "Hodgins, I have a favor to ask."

Shedding a single teardrop, an emerald eye closed.

Chapter 8

Battlefields were like butterflies. They swayed and swayed, lives wandering about infinitely without a destination.

“I am going to break down their vanguard artillery.”

Battles were like businesses. Filled with lies and truths, bargaining, deceptions. Things progressed with revenues and losses.

“I’ll back you up. But Violet, this fight isn’t only yours. Don’t forget that.”

The bigger the proportion, the lower the chances of the ones that had started said battles to be in them. They would throw their soldiers into the blazing flames like chess pieces on a board.

“I recognize that. However, I alone can suffice for a breakthrough. I concluded that involving others would be unnecessary.”

Although the soldiers were bundled up together, that was, in fact, a gathering of distinct individuals.

“War is not something personal of yours. Victory is reached through the cooperation of all soldiers.”

With so many of them, there were surely those who were bound to become very close to one another in the mass of people.

“I understand. As a soldier, I shall grant you victory, Major. And protect you. That is what I exist for.”

Even if the color of their skin, the words that would spew from their lips or everything they had on them were reproved, everyone was the same at the beginning of all. Were they dismembered, there would be no difference in the composition of their blood, flesh or bones. However, even the bodies of snowy countries’ young men and southern nations’ boys were currently sinking within the soil of what was the motherland of none of them.

“I am fine. Prioritize your own body.”

The interchange from life to death occurred naturally, due to the existence of

a greater cause.

“Major, I am your tool; your weapon. Weapons... exist to protect their wielders. Please do not say that to me. The word you always use... is enough for an order. Please say it. ‘Kill’.”

If so, what happened in the meantime that said cause was lost?

Emerald green orbs darkened. In a battlefield of scorching grassland and deluging dirt, the Lord and his subordinate locked eyes with each other. The subordinate kept by the Lord was a beautiful monstrosity. Said monstrosity prided in being the strongest fighter, and was as ignorant as she was innocent. Until the time when her eyelids would close for eternity, she would not know the feeling of having her body burn. There was conviction but no salvation for her. Her hands never held onto anything, and she would most likely continue living that way.

“Violet.”

She was definitely destined to do so.

“Kill.”

The Girl Soldier and Her Everything

The long-lasting confrontation involving the allied nations of the East, West, North and South of the continent was named the Continental War. Resources strife between North and South; religious strife between East and West. The diverging interests of the Northeast and Southwest, which had formed an alliance with and convolutedly comprised each other, interwove with one another and eventually broke out. The Northeast lost, the Southwest won.

Originally, the inequality of the trade between South and North was much too strong, which compelled the North to start the war. The voices of criticism regarding the victory were many, coming from countries that had not participated in the war. What was essential to the war was compensation once it was over. Due to disapproval from other countries, the southern side had only requested the removal of military factories, mainly producing and storing weapons and ammunition, after war reparation. The northern countries had

scarce natural resources, but their machinery industry was superior to the South. The confiscation of such technology and the calling-off of their military forces was what served as the compensation.

As no other sanctions had been imposed, there seemed to be peace at first glimpse, but in reality, it was not an exaggeration to say that unsaid rules had been imposed.

The settlement of the East-West war was of superficial mutual reconciliation. The West, victorious, did not forbid the forms of belief of the East and suggested coexistence. However, it was not a reciprocated compromise in the true sense, as it conditioned the East to accommodate to a certain amount of taxes for each church of the West. Moreover, the East had been prohibited of pilgrimage to Intense, the most important sacred grounds of the East-West religion, which had also been the site of the decisive final battle.

There were numerous states all over the continent's territory. The lump called Continental War had been but one of the conflicts caused by bigger countries putting limits to each other. Nonetheless, peace was brought temporarily to the concerning nations.

Along with postwar reparations, the wounded soldiers would clearly be included in the subjects to come. Soldiers provided for national defense once wars were over. The current objective was to devote medical treatment to the ones that had been injured in the war.

Leidenschaftlich, one of the winning countries, had its military hospital built on a not-so-tall hill. The name of said hill was Anshene. It was a problematic location, as the roadway to it, made by cutting dense trees, was narrow and required caution and driving skills whenever carriages and cars had to pass by one another. Originally, it was a recreational facility of the army, and had been quickly transformed into a medical one in order to make up for the lack of hospitals. Such was one of the consequences brought by the war, in which so many soldiers had been injured that the number of sickbays became insufficient.

When going down the road, one had to pay attention to the passage of small animals, such as squirrels and rabbits. After three or so small animal attention

signs, the hospital could be sighted. The property retained a luxurious, broad garden. It was a place for playing outdoor ball games, where one could bask in a peaceful walk through the woods. Even the parts of it that no one used would now likely see the light of the sun. Due to the increasing support of wounded soldiers' families, the hospital had recently become able to acquire regularly operating shared stagecoaches. Children brought in them played together albeit often being strangers to one another.

Amidst those who hopped off the stagecoach was a remarkable man. He wore a tone-on-tone plaid vest over a white shirt and wide pants made of a Bordeaux-colored fabric, decorated with Suède strings. A plaid ornamental cloth rustled from his waist belt. He was a charismatic man, his fairly long crimson hair tied behind his head. Perhaps because he had many acquaintances in the hospital, amongst not only the nurses but also hospitalized patients and their families, he pleasantly returned all the greetings directed at him. His gait was unfaltering.

He climbed up the stairs and walked through the corridors. The scenery from the windows was the best view that Anshene hill could provide. Beyond the mountain woods was Leiden, the port capitol. A gull flew in the distance, growing farther away. The current season was early summer. The mountain winds brought in the smell of freshly blooming flowers through the open windows.

The room that the man entered after a knock was an infirmary used by multiple people. Female and male soldiers were apparently split. Some patients of that room were separated by curtains and could not be seen, but all were women.

“Mister Hodgins, she has awoken... honestly, it was a hassle.”

The so-called Hodgins was dumbfounded upon being informed in a fatigued tone by a nurse accompanying a patient. “No way, seriously?” his voice echoed through the infirmary. Breaking into falsetto, it denoted amazement, joy and a little bit of unease.

He gazed at the interior of the room with a nervous look. The one he had asked for lay there, on a bed made of rusted white pipes, staring at her own

hands. The eyes that wondrously observed the artificial limbs as if they had been forcefully attached to her shoulders were of a clear blue color. Her hair grew unevenly, but was as flowy and golden as a sea of rice ears. She was a girl so beautiful that she could take one's breath away with just a glance.

As she took notice of Hodgins, who was searching for words as he walked to her side, she opened her mouth first, "Major... where is... Major Gil... bert?" Her lips had cracks from being too dry, blood welling in them.

"Little Violet... you were quite a bit of a Sleeping Beauty."

The girl was an injured soldier, just as the other patients. She was the driving force of Leidenschaftlich's army, acting from the shadows without any registration – the weapon that only a certain man could use, Violet.

"Do you... recognize me? It's Hodgins. I commanded the Leidenschaftlich units at Intense. See, during the night of the last battle, we greeted each other, remember? You weren't waking up, so I was worried."

However, for Hodgins, the fact that she was the soldier his best friend had raised was more significant. As the other patients began talking with one another in hushed whispers, he closed the partition curtains and sat on a nearby chair.

Violet looked into the gap between the curtains. She was probably expecting someone to enter from there. "What about Major...?"

"He isn't here. Since he has been... busy because of the postwar victory. It's not a situation where he'd have an opportunity to come."

"Then... then... he is alive, right...?!"

"That's... right."

"What about his wounds? How are they?"

Taken aback by her frantic aggressiveness, Hodgins stalled for an answer. "In terms of injuries, he was in a better state than you. You should worry more about yourself."

"Whatever happens to me... does not matt..." for a moment, Violet peeked into Hodgins's eyes as if suspecting of something. "Is this information true?"

Her gaze was icy. Precisely because she was so beautiful, her outer ghastliness increased with it.

Yet Hodgins stared back into her blue eyes without wavering. Contrastingly, he put on a cheerful smile. “Worry not, Little Violet. I’ve come to visit you because he asked me to.” With a gentle tone, he created an atmosphere as warm as possible.

Such was Hodgins specialty. From extolling his superiors to making his way into ladies’ bedrooms, the process was different but the technique was the same.

“Major... did?”

Firstly, he had to make the other party think of him as an ally.

“Yeah. We’ve been best friends since back when we studied at the army’s military academy. We always help each other whenever anything happens. We might be more familiar with one another than with our own parents. That’s why I’ve also been entrusted with you. Gilbert is concerned about you. I’m the proof of that. Though you might have forgotten about me...”

“No... Major Hodgins. I recall it. That was the second time... we had met.”

“Eh, you remembered up to the first one? You... didn’t say that on the night of the last battle.”

Hodgins had said during their second encounter, “Well, this isn’t your first meeting with me, but you don’t remember it, do you? I’m an one-sided acquaintance of yours. Call me ‘Major Hodgins’.” And in response, Violet had merely saluted him.

“I had not thought I was being asked to speak.”

“Do you really remember... our meeting in the training grounds?”

“I had not yet learned words back then, so whatever was said is unclear to me. But Major Hodgins was very friendly with Major... Major Gilbert.”

As he had thought she had taken no notice of such things, his happiness was more prominent than his astonishment. The tension that had previously surrounded the two of them had diminished slightly. Violet was self-conscious

of Hodgins, and Hodgins was self-conscious of Violet.

“Is that so? He is all right...?” Violet closed her eyes and sighed in relief.

What the nurse had described as a “hassle” possibly referred to that. Someone who would only ask about Gilbert in spite of whatever was being said to her was unquestionably a hassle.

“Your unit’s achievement was particularly huge. To compensate, there were many casualties, but... it’s the same for all the corps. Just as planned, you caused a disruption, destroyed the North’s posture, and we were able to strike them down.”

“The doctors have told me... that we won the Great War. But I do not... have any memory... of the very end.”

“You were lying on top of Gilbert and you both fell unconscious. Then, you were saved by a comrade who called for reinforcements. It was close, but well, neither of you died. Your blood loss was especially profuse.”

—*Your resistance level is beyond that of humans.* Such words had traveled up his throat, yet he did not muster them out.

“What kind of mission... is Major in at the moment? When should I join him? My body... is not moving, but... it will return to normal within a few days. Major was also supposed to have suffered serious damage. His eye...” Violet’s voice wilted halfway, “I was unable to protect him. I will at least stay by his side to replace his eye.”

—*It ain’t very good... to believe too much... in something.*

From the very start, the girl had not mourned the loss of her arms at all, only worrying about a man that was not present. Hodgins could not sincerely think well of her blind devotion.

—*Trust and faith are different things.*

Violet’s attitude was close to faith. Hodgins’s way of thinking was, very much like him, oriented by a calculation of profit and loss. Be it with material possessions or with lovers, overestimation was not advantageous. Otherwise, any case of sudden betrayal or disappearance would be unbearable. He was

very passionately enthusiastic when it came to social disposition, but his reasoning was cold.

“That will be impossible, Little Violet. The one who should worry about their body is you. Your arms... you must already have noticed, but there was nothing that could have been done. I’d wanted them... to have put prosthetics of a more subtle design on you, but... this is a military hospital. They ended up being combat-specialized ones. I’m sorry.”

“It is good that they are sturdy. Why are you apologizing, Major Hodgins?”

Upon being asked, Hodgins shrugged. He had no words to reply with. “I wonder why.” His eyebrows were low as if he were troubled.

With that, the conversation came to a halt and a drape of silence fell between them. Perhaps because the infirmary was quiet, said drape was painfully perceptible.

“Little Violet, is there anything you want to eat?”

The sound of the second hand of a clock hanging on one of the infirmary’s walls.

“No, Major Hodgins.”

The whispering voices of nurses and patients.

“Don’t you... want some water?”

Their own breathing.

“It is unnecessary.”

They all echoed much too conspicuously.

An image of every bullet of potential topics shot at Violet being sliced by her with her battle-axe Witchcraft played in Hodgins’s head. The talk did not progress from there.

—*This is a problem. To think that a guy like me would have difficulty chatting with a girl...*

Hodgins groaned inwardly at how considerably hard it was to please the Warrior Maiden of Leidenschaftlich. Their only commonality was Gilbert

Bougainvillea. However, since she dedicated her body to her Lord to the point that the first thing she had asked upon awakening were his whereabouts, wouldn't speaking of him only cause her to feel desolate?

—*I mean... does she even think of anything as lonesome? She does seem... obsessed with him, though.*

It was hardly imaginable that the girl, who looked like an inorganic and refined art piece, was a living being. Was she alive or dead? If she were alive, what did she enjoy in her life?

—*Aah... Gilbert, you've asked a pretty troublesome favor.*

It was difficult to divide people into two types, but there were those who could withstand silence and who could not. Hodgins was rather the latter. His gaze instinctively lowered to his feet as he aimlessly rocked his shoes with them. As his droopy, grayish blue eyes wandered to the floor, he found something. He then reminisced to the existence of what could get him out of his dilemma.

“That’s right, I had brought gifts for the visit! I’d been avoiding doing this because I was told it would get in the nurses’ way, but I’ve actually been bringing in a quite a bit of stuff until now. Here.” Hodgins took paper bags from under the bed. He turned towards Violet, who could not sit up, and pulled a stuffed black cat from within one of them.

Violet’s reaction was minimal.

He then took out a stuffed feline with tiger strips. Lastly, he took out a stuffed dog. Lining the three of them up, he made them bow with a, ““Hello’!”

Her reaction was still dull.

“Is it... no good?”

“What is?”

“Did they get reproved as a present for you?”

Violet’s big eyes blinked. Her golden lashes swayed as well. “For me...?” She really did hold doubt. “Why for me?” Violet asked again, adding one more word.

"Since you were injured and hospitalized, getting gifts during visits is only the obvious. I see, so you'd never been hospitalized before. These are my feelings... like, 'get well soon'. Your belongings... have gone missing in the postwar turmoil. You have nothing now. That's why, in order for the room not to get lonely..." at that second, Hodgins's body gave a pronounced flinch.

It was because Violet had let out a gasp that sounded like a swallowed scream.

"A-Are you okay, Little Violet?"

"Brooch..."

"Little Violet?"

"My brooch... my emerald brooch... it is something that Major gave me. If it has been lost, I must look for it. It was given to me...!" Violet moved her neck in a forceful attempt to stand.

Hodgins frantically moved to stop her. Nevertheless, there were no issues, even without him holding her back. Violet could not get up at all.

"Why? Why...?"

There was no way that someone who had been in a coma for months, and on top of it, had their upper limbs fall off and be replaced by artificial ones, could immediately start walking around. Her prosthetics creaked.

He held down her shoulders as she seemed to be about to collapse. From the sides, it looked as if he was pinning her violently.

—*Cut me some slack.*

Hodgins's inner gentleman could not forgive the manner with which he was pressing down the girl soldier that his best friend had entrusted to him, who was also a woman weakened due to losing her arms.

"Is it fine as long as it's emerald? I'll buy another to replace it, okay?"

Violet shook her head slightly. "There is... no replacement." She closed her eyes as if suppressing something.

Hodgins concluded it was an extremely important item. "I understand. I'll buy

it back, so rest assured, Little Violet.” He declared without thinking twice.

“Can you do it...?” Violet’s resistance ceased instantaneously.

Without delay, Hodgins put on a boastful grin and nodded, “Probably. I think it’s gone to the black market. I’ll try to contact a merchant that I’m acquainted with. Please, don’t think of going anywhere out of here in that state. Until then, couldn’t you endure it using these? Stuffed toys and brooches are... completely different things, but... ain’t they cute? This is exactly like one I used to own in the past. Little Violet, would you have preferred stuffed rabbits or bears?”

“I do not know.”

“Which is the cutest one out of them? If you had to choose no matter what, tell me which it would be.”

She had certainly never been asked such a question before. Violet silently eyed the pluses from right to left.

“What if the condition is that the world would end if you didn’t respond? Okay, three, two, one! Answer!”

“No way... the dog... maybe?”

“Mickey, right?! Ah, Mickey is the name of the dog I used to own. Then, I’ll leave him right beside you. Isn’t that great, Mickey? You’ve been chosen.”

Hodgins placed the stuffed dog he had named Mickey near Violet’s face. He massaged his own chest while watching her finally calm down. Cold sweat trailed his back.

Primarily, Violet seemed to have no interest, but eventually dragged her head close to the stuffed toy and touched it with her face.

After casually watching her for a moment, Hodgins said, “Little Violet. There’s a tad too many people here, so if a private room becomes vacant, should I transfer you? The formalities have been dealt with. It’s... been several months since that last battle. At first, the infirmary was also crowded, and there weren’t enough beds. But now the number of people has finally decreased... though that was just from the fact that most who were brought here died... that’s why... it seems there will be private rooms available. When that happens, these can be put there as well...”

Was a stuffed toy itself something rare to her? Perhaps because it felt pleasant albeit feeble, Violet closed her eyes and rubbed her nose against its stomach. As she had just awakened, she could not yet move her untrained prosthetics. She could only touch it with her head. Once she had pushed it too much and it strayed, she stirred her neck and landed her cheek on it again.

“And, also...” At the sight, whatever Hodgins was about to say was erased from his mind. “Erm...”

Her actions were incredibly natural.

“Is it fun... to touch... that plushie?”

“I do not understand ‘fun’. However, I believe I want to keep touching it.” Possibly due to her anxiety and nervousness subsiding, her tone was softer than before. She politely thanked him as he held still the plush that was drifting apart from her nose once more.

—*She was... this kind of child?*

An emotion unlike whatever had been wafting within Hodgins until now began to sprout in a corner of his heart. It was not fear, inconvenience or desire to control. It was something more lukewarm.

“I see... yeah, I used to be like that in the past too. Little kids... ah, no, I don’t mean it in a bad way, but... little kids do that a lot. It’s not... like they’ll always be looked after by their parents.”

“I do not know my parents.”

“Aah, that’s right...”

Children would touch humanoid and animal toys in search of solace. But those were not real protection from insecurity and toxic environments. In actuality, they were but substitutes. Childhood itself was a replacement for shelter.

—*She was... the kind of child to do something like this?*

He could not determine anything just from her reaction.

—*No, isn’t it more like... she can’t keep up without doing something like this? Right now, she is genuinely... alone.*

“Erm... what was it again? That’s right, if there are any other... other... things you want me to do, just say it. Gilbert entrusted you to me. If you’re bothered by anything, I’ll try to solve the matter however I can. Somehow, the things I’m saying are messed up, huh. When you woke up, I was... a bit... shocked, and ended up talking too much.”

Violet replied curtly, “Thank you very much.”

Hodgins, who was a master at keeping a poker face, maintained a grin, but under his smiling façade, he embraced a completely different feeling.

—*I see, so that’s how it was?*

He had not had many opportunities to get to know Violet – only during the few days subsequent to the gruesome spectacle presented in the training grounds, in which he had seen Gilbert for the first in a long time after their promotions, and the night before the final battle. Once said battle was over, he had come visit her many times. Violet had no parents or siblings. Neither did she have friends. Hodgins was always her sole visitor.

—*Even though I know how powerful she is, and how many she can kill...*

Perhaps he should disqualify her as a weapon and put an end to such insanity.

—*Aah, this is...*

Just from conversing with her normally and watching her movements, he could understand.

—*This is no good. This... I mean... Gilbert, you...*

“Major Hodgins?”

—*Isn’t she... just a young girl?*

Hodgins felt as if a soft spot somewhere within his heart had been hollowed out with a spoon. As she was so demonic in battle, he had forgotten about it. He had played a blind eye to it. Most likely, anyone in the Leidenschaftlich army who sighted her had done so as well.

“If this... is left in my care, will it not break?”

Violet was but a child that would do nothing when she was not fighting. She

was not registered as a person, and had been raised not knowing life outside of the battlefield. She was a beauty-endowed weapon, a commodity, an asset. A girl soldier that was permitted to live in exchange for her battling capabilities had no need for unnecessary knowledge.

One would never think that watching her in combat would instigate so much fear that people would not dare speak to her. Her adult-like appearance caused men to feel excited rather than paternal. She was not treated as a child at all.

—*Still, what's in front of my eyes now is...*

“You can do as you please. It's already yours.”

“All right.”

What lay before Hodgins's eyes was the girl that Gilbert Bougainvillea had made a ‘person’. The one who had taught her words and manners was Gilbert himself. Doing so while leading army troops in wartime must have been terribly difficult. Hodgins knew of Violet's initial circumstances.

“Major Hodgins, is something wrong?”

“No, nothing. Isn't there... anything else?”

While taking back the bags, Hodgins was immersed in the feeling that his entire body was rotting. He attempted recalling how he had regarded Violet so far.

—*That time, I... wagered on you.*

He no longer remembered what he had bought with the cigarettes he had earned. Gilbert had stubbornly refused to take his own share.

—*I had thought you would, surely, be of use to the military.*

Just as he had imagined, Violet had done an excellent job. During the final battle, she had successfully caused the disturbance that had been the key of his strategy. That had been merely one portion of a grander achievement, but he did not know of other soldiers whom could say they would have accomplished the same in that situation. Had she not fought, the number of casualties amongst their allies would have been even bigger. Conversely, there were many who would have escaped death without her there. She was that kind of

existence.

—*I thought... we could use you.*

The girl who had survived by slaughtering men one after another at those training grounds pledged allegiance to Gilbert alone. A part of Hodgins had believed that, since she was a monster, she was better off as a cold-hearted assassin doll that could not conceal her brutal nature.

—*There's no way...*

The girl who had been named Violet peeked through the curtains with unyielding expectation. Her figure was similar to that of a chick searching for its parent bird.

—*...that this... was the case.*

“Little Violet, I’m sorry.”

“For what reason?”

“The gifts I have aren’t that good. Next time, I’ll prepare lots of stuff to surprise you. You used to travel a lot, so you haven’t gone shopping downtown, right?”

“Only once.”

“Is that so? I’ll put in more effort next time. Get your hopes up. Even if you don’t like them and they’re no good, it’d be great if you could not throw them away.”

“I do not quite understand, but I will not do that.”

“Kay, thanks.”

After that, even as the conversation did not continue, Hodgins stayed with Violet until sunset. They could hardly chat as Violet had continuously fallen asleep and awoken in the process, since she was unable to stay conscious for too long.

At evening, a bell would resound to inform the end of visits in the hospital. Along with it, the nurses started prompting visitors remaining in each room to take their leave. Hodgins was unable to move immediately.

“Major Hodgins, the visiting period is over.”

“Hm.”

“Is it all right for you not to go home?”

In the beginning, their talk had not been progressing and he had wanted to hurry home, but now he wanted to be by her side very much. Leaving her alone in that state ached in his conscience. As he pierced his own heart with the fact that that such pain was too late to occur, what he felt was even more of it.

“The nurse is glaring at me, so it’s not. Guess I’ll go home... ah, speaking of which, I forgot to say this: I’m not a major anymore. I’ve quit the military.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

“What do soldiers... do when they deploy from the military?”

“We can do anything. Life doesn’t have only one path. In my case, I’m an entrepreneur trying to open his own business. I’ll be the president of an agency. Next time, I’ll tell you about that.”

“All right, Maj... Hodgins...” She was certainly at loss as to how she should refer to him.

Hodgins giggled. “You can call me ‘President Hodgins’. I don’t have any employees yet so I’m not referred to like this, and I can’t get anyone to call me that.”

“President Hodgins.”

“It doesn’t have a bad ring to it. When Little Violet said ‘president’, I got chills.”

“Are you cold?”

“Hmm... next time I come, I’ll explain to you about jokes.”

Although it was summer, Hodgins pulled Violet’s comforter up to shoulder level so that she would not be chilly at night, placing the dog plush next to her face once again. She stared straight into him. Unlike the first time she had done so, Hodgins was unable to bear it and wound up averting his gaze. He directed it

to the window. The scenery that could be seen from the infirmary was dyed with the orange shades of sunset.

The borders of day and night intertwining was a scene that one would always end up contemplating, regardless of where they were, what time it was or what they were doing. The clouds in the sky, the sea, the earth, the city, the people; a madder red light poured over everything. Even as those that received such grace were not actually equal, at that moment, all were homogeneously covered and gradually being embraced by the night. As Hodgins commented, "Pretty, huh?", Violet replied with, "It is beautiful."

"Well, then." Hodgins said as he got up from his chair.

"Farewell."

"This isn't a 'farewell'. I'll come again."

—*Though you... may have zero interest in me.*

Opposing his expectations, Violet whispered expressionlessly, "See you..."

She had fixed the "farewell" into "see you".

"Yeah, see ya, Little Violet."

After a brief silence as if she were deep in thought, Violet nodded a bit.

Insects cried so as to inform the world of their short life.

The hospital of Leidenschaftlich's army was encircled by a forest with lush greenery. The path arranged for wheelchairs to pass through pushed by volunteer soldiers had recently started turning into a resting place for patients. Wooden tables and chairs were scattered along its course, and it was not uncommon to see the hospital staff distributing meals around them at lunchtime. In that midst were a man and a girl.

"Little Violet, aren't you tired?"

Both sat on stump chairs next to each other. Some time had passed since the early summer of their reunion, and they spent the best moment of sun exposure quietly. It was a windy, refreshing and easygoing summer day.

"President Hodgins, there are no issues. How about ten more strolls?"

Violet wore a loose cotton dress. Although it was a simple and plain clothing, her emerald brooch gleamed on her chest. She would occasionally glance down at it to confirm its existence. Watching her, Hodgins smiled without pointing it out.

"That won't do. The doctor told you to just go once and return, right? I also get anxious when I see you like this... I'll push you on the way back."

"But..."

"No."

"But..."

"You can't. I'll know right away if you're forcing yourself."

"All right..."

"Now, let's wipe that sweat, or else, you'll catch a cold." Hodgins took out a handkerchief.

Violet grabbed onto it, preventing him of properly cleaning her forehead.

"Can't I be the one wiping it?"

"No can do. I would not be able to practice otherwise."

"But, hey, you'll mess up your hair."

"No can do. The one who said I should first and foremost learn to move these arms was you, Maj... President Hodgins. Indeed... in this condition, I would be of no use to Major. Quite the reverse, I would be a dead weight."

At that, Hodgins did not let any bitter smiles or afflicted expressions show.

Ever since the girl soldier Violet had awoken, the number of visits he paid her had accumulated into two months. Every time they saw each other, he was consistently asked first-thing whether Gilbert Bougainvillea would visit. The latter had not come until now. Hodgins was unable to do anything about it, but he could not handle Violet's sorrowful face whenever he had to say, "He won't come today". Therefore, he had persuaded her with, "While Gilbert doesn't come, what you're supposed to do isn't to lament for his absence but to do whatever you can. In other words, to rest and head towards recovery.

Becoming able to use your arms with pride when you meet him is your mission.”

That had a profound effect on Violet.

“I will definitely master the use of these arms even better than my flesh ones. Estark Inc.’s prosthetics are combat-specialized... if my skills catch up to them, I should be able to become an even more useful existence.”

She was the sort of person that shone brighter when having missions or orders to follow. It was her main trait.

“No, that’s not true. Just by existing, girls are already as praise-worthy and wonderful as the miraculous limpid waters that flow from mountaintop springs. Men are filthy.”

“I fail to understand that example, but I think that while I am unable to receive Major’s orders, I should train autonomously.”

“Okay...”

It was a somewhat strange conversation, but the mood was not somber. On the contrary: the two of them, who were a disagreeable combination, had unexpectedly become familiar with one another. And that, in retrospect to Hodgins’s relationships, might not be so odd. He and Gilbert were best friends, but Gilbert corresponded to him essentially in a leveled manner. Meanwhile, Hodgins had the tricky characteristic of proffering his love for women but being fond of swaying amongst beautiful people regardless of them being male or female.

“It’s a tricky lifestyle, huh, Little Violet.” Hodgins made a comment also supposedly directed at himself as if only speaking impersonally.

Violet repeatedly picked the handkerchief after letting it fall on her lap, finally managing to wipe the sweat. She had been able to leave her previous state of not being able to use her arms at all, but had not yet received permission to do everything on her own.

“Good job.” After fixing her disheveled forelocks with his fingertips, Hodgins sat Violet on her wheelchair.

“Are we already leaving?”

“Since the wind has started to get chilly.”

“I will... not sweat anymore.”

“If you can, I want you to teach me that technique. No matter what you say, no can do. Let’s go back to your room.”

—*It’s exactly because she’s a kid who forces herself a lot that I don’t want to let her do too much therapeutic exercise.* Hodgins thought while leisurely pushing the wheelchair.

As always, Violet’s reactions were dispassionate, yet as she cast her eyes down, she seemed somewhat depressed. It was but Hodgins’s own assumption – however, that was how she looked to him.

—*Even so, it’s no good to take away what she’s doing. Isn’t there a better training method?*

The two that had become used to silence returned to her room. It was not a big one, yet it was just about enough to shun outsiders. The girl soldier with artificial upper limbs, whom only the ones she was close to truly knew, was a frequent target of rudeness and impolite stares.

As a result of her being transferred to a private lodging, Hodgins was able to bring her many gifts. When entering the place, the fragrance of fresh flower arrangements wafted towards them, several stuffed animals welcoming the duo. Clothes and shoes that she had not yet worn lay in piled boxes wrapped with ribbons. It was a very feminine room. Inside of it, Violet’s outstanding figure as she sat on her bed was akin to that of a doll.

“Little Violet, I have something for you.”

“I have received enough. There is nothing I can give in return. I will have to refuse.” Violet shook her head and turned to the side, displaying predictable rejection towards Hodgins, who would bring something during every visit, as a doting grandfather would do with his granddaughter.

“No, it’s nothing too expensive. Actually, it’s a secondhand notepad of mine. A fountain pen, too. I just changed the ink, so I don’t think it’ll run out so soon.”

Hodgins put the objects on the desk installed in the private room – a hardcover book-like notepad and a golden fountain pen.

As she was surged, Violet sat in front of the desk, prompted to pick them up. Only a few sheets of the notepad had been used. Hodgins took them off and threw them away.

“Let’s make of this... practice for your hands. Do calligraphy. If I’m correct, you were able to write your name, right?”

“Yes... however, I cannot write... other words.”

“Isn’t that fine? It’s exactly because the hospital life is boring that it was your fate to learn it at a time like this. It’s better to have a goal. How much would you aim to be able to do?”

“Letters.” Violet said as if coughing. “I want to become able to write letters.” Her voice contained urgency.

Hodgins’s eyes and mouth were wide-open in bewilderment. That was a great offer for him. He was actually going to take the matter into that same direction at his own convenience.

“Why... did you think of that? Little Violet, it’s rare for you to have something you want to do. Like, aside from training...”

“Letters can deliver words to those who are far away. There are no communication devices here. However, if I wrote a letter... and received a response, although I would not be using my voice, it would be the same as having a talk. Major might not have spare time for it. Still, I... the fact that I, his tool, am here... to Major...”

Even as she did not finish speaking, he understood.

“To Major...”

Violet did not want to be forgotten. She wanted to remind Gilbert Bougainvillea of her existence as the tool that was there for his sake.

“You wanted to convey your thoughts to him.”

“Yes... No... No, most likely... Yes.” Came the ineffective reply.

She was unable to properly express her feelings. Hodgins knew it well. Every time he opened the door to her room, he would witness Violet's expectant expressions disappear.

—*Aah, no good. This kind of stuff is really no good.* Hodgins pressed his eyelids with one hand and exhaled a breath.

“President Hodgins?”

“Hm, sorry, just wait a jiffy. I'll recover soon.” He flailed his other hand and faced elsewhere. The insides of his canthus were hot. His chest hurt. He bit his lip, attempting to somehow cancel out the pain in his heart with the pain of his body, to no avail.

—*I wonder if I'm getting old.*

As he was touched by the ‘humane’ face that the automated assassin doll had unintentionally showed him, for some reason, he felt like crying.

—*I'm so sad that it's agonizing.*

The sound of his sniffles reached Violet's ears. Her shoulders flinched once in alarm, just as a small animal would do when sensing danger. It was only Hodgins's bodily impression, but an aura of not knowing how to deal with the circumstances emanated from her.

“Wait just thirty more seconds...”

Violet observed the surroundings. Her blue eyes carefully searched in the room for something supposedly necessary in such a situation. She took a handkerchief from her nightstand and a black cat plush from her bed. As the strength of her grip did not make it until she reached Hodgins, they fell to the floor. By the moment she squatted to pick them up, Hodgins was already back to normal. He crouched as well to help her out.

“Were you, by any chance, trying to comfort me?”

His painfully clenched heart unraveled at her clumsy gentleness. A form of affection unlike romantic love bloomed deep within his chest.

“President Hodgins, you told me before that, in your early childhood, you would nestle with a stuffed toy that resembled this black cat one to deceive

your own loneliness whenever you cried from not being cared for by your parents..."

However, said feeling blew away the next second.

"Did I... tell you even about that!?"

"You once came here drunk on the way back from a business negotiation and talked about half of your life for nearly two hours."

Now Hodgins wanted to cry for a different motive.

"Little Violet, if I show up drunk any next time, it's okay if you don't take my words seriously. You can even hit me. Really... I'll avoid alcohol. I'll drink tea from now on. I'll live off tea. Aah, how embarrassing... what did I say after that?"

"That you are named Claudia... because your parents had believed you would be born as a girl and prepared to receive you as such, but you wound up earning the name either way and it was difficult to live with this."

"Alright, let's go back to the letter writing work, Little Violet."

Claudia Hodgins was at his limit in countless ways.

The duo's new experiment started with becoming able to hold the fountain pen. Just from her writing a single character, the pen would roll away and she would grab it back. Her figure as she would attempt to pick it whenever it fell onto the floor caused Hodgins's heart to be enveloped in sorrow again.

"You can take it slow."

For Hodgins, who had only ever attended the army's military academy, playing the role of teacher was quite rough. The same applied to Violet. Although she could dismantle guns, she did not know how to write. The unskillful teacher and student had no choice but complement each other's ineptitude. In her current level, he thought of her being able to write letters as a marvelous future.

"I want to become able to write... Major Gilbert's name."

Along with the progress of her writing, the scenery outside the window gradually faded.

Decayed maple leaves created a colorful carpet over the ground. It seemed the main entrance of the Leidenschaftlich Army Hospital would not be clean of them in time. The mountain road to said hospital was tinted in the sigh-inducing beauty of nature. The world was completely dyed in autumn colors.

In front of said main entrance, a young woman awaited someone, her trunk case and trolley bag lying on the ground. Perhaps because she had too much luggage, her stuffed toys' heads stuck out of the bag. She was most likely being stood up, staring into the air in an unspecific direction. It was a girl beautiful enough to become a painting. She wore a wisteria mist nude coat and a black high-neck knitted jumper. Her raw organdy lilac skirt rustled noisily every time the wind blew it.

The golden hair of the female soldier Violet was growing quite long. It delayed the number of days that she had spent in the hospital. As she spotted a small carriage coming from the mountain path, she took her luggage with her creaking prosthetic hands. With no inconveniences, she lifted them with both arms and headed to where the carriage had stopped. Similarly, a man made his way towards her.

“Sorry, sorry. A lot happened at work, so I ended up being late.” Even though it was an autumn where the gelid breeze could make one shiver, Hodgins was drenched in sweat as he came running, showing a surprised smile as he saw Violet wearing ordinary girl clothes, almost as if not recognizing her. “Little Violet, you look cute. My choice was wonderful! I have so many talents that it’s troublesome... maybe I should have gotten into the fashion industry. What about the brooch?”

“I have it. I thought it might get lost during the moving...”

“It won’t fall that soon. You should put it on. Lend it to me.” Hodgins placed the emerald brooch firmly on Violet’s chest.

Violet showed no signs of cautiousness, although the distance between the two of them was small.

“Done. It suits you, Little Violet.”

Even as he patted her head, she remained docile, not pushing his hand away.

It seemed she had accepted Hodgins, who had taken care of her for a long while.

“Major Hodgins.”

“President’.”

“President Hodgins, where should I go now that I have been discharged? What will be my next post? Major has not replied to my letters. I have sent several of them already.” Taking Hodgins’s hand, Violet entered the carriage.

“From now on, you’ll become the foster daughter of a certain noble family. Their son passed away during the Great War, you see. They were looking for an adoption candidate. Their household is related to Gilbert’s. You’ll be educated on lady manners there.”

After confirming that the passengers had come inside the carriage, the cabby set it off. It swung pronouncedly once. Violet stood still with a serious look. She was not caught off-guard in the slightest by the oscillation.

“Are those teachings necessary for fighting?”

Just as she had thought she would finally return to the place where she could put her abilities to use, she was informed of an outrageous fact. Her reaction had been moderate.

Hodgins bent his waist, facing Violet’s eyes directly. “The war has ended, so you won’t be needed as a soldier anymore. That’s why you will learn what’s necessary to lead a life that isn’t the one of a warrior.”

“I do not understand...”

Hodgins nodded at the response he had already foreseen. “Yeah. It’s a pretty complicated issue, and I’m also forcing my own values onto you.”

“Complicated... issue’. Even for... you, President Hodgins? Is it not easy?”

“Little Violet, why did you use to kill people?”

“I had that ability, and it was needed. Simple as that.”

“Yeah. In order to live, in order to protect yourself, you’d been killing... surely, you had been doing that even before meeting Gilbert, because someone made

you so. It was like a task of getting rid of obstacles... there's no emotion to it."

—*And that caused you to malfunction as a person.*

"Aah, truly complicated. Hm, for example, let's say I was attacked by a thug. You killed the thug to save me. It would have been better if you had acted without doing so, but you killed him. There's a moral cause in that. You almost certainly wouldn't be convicted for the crime. Actually, you'd be a hero."

"What is a 'moral cause'?"

"Something important that people believe they should abide to while living. If you don't abide to it, in the world of humans, you'll be caught by the military police. Can you understand if it's from that angle?"

"Yes."

"Then, another example. I had actually wanted to be killed by the thug. I gave him money and asked him to murder me. I wanted to die. We'd discussed our losses and gains and made a deal. You misunderstood that, meddled and ended up executing a person who was merely playing the role of thug and going to kill me because I asked. Do you think this is a murder with a moral cause?"

Silence.

"See, it's pretty complicated, right? There's probably no correct answer. In the legislation made by humans, both would likely be tried, but a correct answer probably doesn't exist. Forget the example of just now for a bit."

Violet thoughtfully leaned her rigid and inorganic hands on her cheeks. At the moment, Hodgins was confronting her with what she considered to be ruthless words. Yet that was a problem she would have stumbled upon sooner or later.

There existed a girl soldier. She had slaughtered many. Although the murders had been for a greater cause, she had still killed people.

Was that girl soldier allowed to find happiness?

"Only, what I can say for sure is..." despite fearfully not wanting to be ostracized by the confused Violet, Hodgins spoke, "I don't want to see you killing anyone, so I don't want to let you go someplace where you'd have to do that. This is a completely emotion-driven theory, but... I think it's the closest it

gets to a solution."

He almost despised Gilbert Bougainvillea for burdening him with such a role.

"Murders increase the number of sad people. That's why I don't want you to do it. I want to avoid... things that could be sad. I don't feel this towards the whole world. I only seek it... for those whom I cherish. Gilbert was the same... that's why we say 'no'. We push our ideals onto you. A moral cause with an extremely egoistical thinking of killing or not killing. The world is becoming like that. Everyone... is really selfish. Little Violet, what was the last order you received from Gilbert?"

Upon being asked, Violet reminisced to the peak of the Great War. Gilbert was covered in blood. She had cried. Those had probably been the first tears she had shed.

"*I love you.*" As she pondered over those powerful words, her heart would race. Just by recalling them, her heartbeats would intensify.

"To escape from the military and live freely."

"That's how it is."

The conclusion had come to light. For Violet, Gilbert's orders had to be followed. She would not reject them so long as there were no exorbitant perils. Even so, it seemed that she had difficulties in accepting a future where she would not return to the battlefield.

"Is that something beneficial to the military? Even if it results in our allies' deaths if I do not kill?"

"The enemies are also people. Besides... it's because you don't know that killing people is slowly setting fire to your body and scorching it that I'm telling you this... Little Violet."

The girl soldier – rather, the former girl soldier – dropped her gaze to her own body. Nothing was on fire. She could only see the materials of her beautiful clothes.

"I am not burning."

"You are."

“I am not. This is strange.”

“Nope, you are. I saw you burning and left you alone. I regret that.”

Everything Hodgins said was abstract.

“You will learn a lot from now on. And then, surely, the things you have done... the things I said I left you alone to do... there will come a time when you’ll understand what they were.”

The subordinate kept by the Lord was a beautiful monstrosity.

“And then, for the first time, you’ll notice the many burns that you have.”

Said monstrosity prided in being the strongest fighter, and was as ignorant as she was innocent.

“You’ll realize that there’s still fire at your feet. You’ll realize that there are people pouring oil onto it. It might be easier to live without knowing this. There will certainly be times when you’ll cry.”

Until the time when her eyelids would close for eternity, she would not know the feeling of having her body burn. There was conviction but no salvation for her.

“Still, I want you to know. That’s why you won’t go back to the military.”

Her hands never held onto anything, and she would most likely continue living that way.

“Little Violet, let’s change your fate.”

She was definitely destined to do so.

However, a certain man had appeared to grasp the hand of the burning girl and throw her into a lake. Although he was not present, he undoubtedly existed.

“The people you’ll meet now are officials from the upper military departments and who belong to a prestigious family that others don’t have contact with right away. From the get-go, your name wasn’t registered in the military. So, start a new life from this point.”

“But then, I won’t be by Major’s side...”

“This is an order from Gilbert, whom you want to become the strength of. He wished for this. What are you to Gilbert, Little Violet?”

“I am... Major’s...”

“Aah, we’re here. We have to give our greetings.”

The carriage had stopped. Without being able to do anything else, Violet hopped off, led by Hodgins’s hand.

Although old-fashioned, a mansion with an architecture magnificent enough to be mistaken for a castle rose at the end of the long road. An elderly couple walked out of said mansion. While they had not yet arrived, Hodgins whispered into Violet’s ear, “Try to not be rude.”

Violet hurried to hold onto her emerald brooch. The carriage was already starting to depart from the same path it had come from. Beyond said path, she did not spot the figure of the person she had wished to be there. No matter how much Violet sought him, he would not come see her.

“These are the head of the Evergarden family and his wife. They will be your substitute parents. Now, your greetings.”

The elegant but gentle elderly couple took Violet’s artificial hands without hesitation. They smiled at her as if unbearably contented.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. I am Violet.”

And thus, Violet Evergarden was born.

Snow melted into the nightly sea. The water surface was even darker than the starry sky that people slept under. The flakes being absorbed by it one after another were a rare sight in the south of Leidenschaftlich.

Children ran towards the gift from the sky after opening their windows. Doormen of wealthy estates trembled with the coldness. Sailors were relieved to have finished their voyages safely and returned home before the snowstorm. In such scenes that were rarely witnessed, the arrival of winter could be keenly felt.

In the south of Leidenschaftlich, snow fell only a few times a year and never piled up. No one would have been able to tell it would downpour incessantly by

a capricious command from the heavens on that year. Normally, there would be nothing but nimble snowfall, yet it had piled up to reach the knees of adult males.

A government meteorologist announced the occurrence to be a once-in-a-century abnormality in the weather, and the southern part of the country was caught in a temporary disorder. People would slip when coming outside and the roads for carriages and cars had vanished. Those who did not have stocks at home had flooded food shops and restaurants, from which came screams of rapture and apprehension. Once logistics had ceased, no one was walking around the city. It was wrapped in silence, as if the snow had absorbed all sounds.

Among it was the figure of Hodgins, who advanced along the snowy path, used as he was to walking over it despite being from a southern country. For someone like him, one of the former majors of Leidenschaftlich's army, which had clashed with the northern countries, the snowy scenery overlapped with the battlefields.

He continued trailing the lone roadway silently while pushing over the snow with his dragging winter shoes. In front of him, although faintly, he could see the Evergarden manor, which was far apart from Leiden, the capitol city of Leidenschaftlich. He let out a thankful sigh in relief. The puff of his breath soon dissipated like smoke in the darkness.

As he arrived at last, firstly, he was welcomed by a butler of the Evergarden residence. The mansion could not be considered warm in every corner due to its large structure, yet Hodgins, who had endured the passing of a dark snowy night, was grateful enough to even be inside a room. During his reception, he spent a few minutes drinking hot tea next to the fireplace.

“You have finally arrived, Mister Hodgins. I was thinking you would not come today.” An elderly woman with a silk nightgown appeared before him.

“Miss Tiffany, it has been a while. I’m sorry for visiting in the middle of the night.” Hodgins bowed respectfully.

“That is my line. You were in another continent, am I right? It was my mistake to summon you immediately after your return.”

"There's no way I would refuse the request of a lady. Where's Mister Patrick?"

"My husband has left me here and confined himself in a far-off town. He still protects this land, but he will certainly not see this scenery again before he passes... Since this is about that person, even though he is already so old, I think he might even be playing with snow outside. He better catch a cold."

The image of a youth merrily making snowmen formed in Hodgins's mind. "It's wonderful that he is a candid person that does not forget his childish innocence."

"No, he is but a child. Even so, he is the head of the Evergarden family... still, rather than Patrick, we should discuss about Violet. My head is full of her at the moment."

Tiffany Evergarden started talking with a melancholic face. It seemed she had attempted to give Violet various sorts of knowledge ever since taking her in. From schooling to etiquette, horsemanship, singing, cooking and dancing. Yet she would not enjoy any of them or show a remotely delighted expression, and whenever she had nothing to do, she would shut herself in her room and write letters all day long. However, none of the letters she had sent ever earned a reply.

"She has become pretty familiar with everyone in the house, and even massaged Patrick's shoulders a while ago. He cried from joy... no, it might have actually hurt. But even though she is awkward, I believe she is a good child. Our hearts, which felt as if they had been stabbed when our son died, are gradually healing... I like her sincere innocence."

"So do I."

"But if only we are healed, there would be no meaning in adopting her." Seemingly cold, Tiffany braced herself over her gown. "We took her in after hearing everything about her circumstances. We are the ones that actually should bestow her with something... is it no use, after all? If there is no blood relation..."

"That is not true."

In spite of Hodgins's assertion, Tiffany shook her head. "We cannot... replace Gilbert."

"Just as Violet cannot really replace your son. No one can replace another person. We can only be of comfort. Ever since that girl left wherever she came from, she has not had a home to return to until now. Neither did she have people waiting for her with a warm meal. But she does now. This time, whatever path she decides to take will be very important. Just this much is enough. It's something very precious. Please do not send her off."

"Send her off'...! I have no such intention. If I had to let go of Violet, I would rather sell my husband."

Her gaze held no lies.

"Miss Tiffany... this exchange is becoming very fascinating, but please cherish your husband."

"Honestly, a daughter is much cuter than a husband..."

"Please do not destroy the dreams of an unmarried man."

"If you have any interest, I can introduce you to as many candidates as you want."

As Tiffany's eyes shone, Hodgins quickly halted the conversation, making his way to Violet's room as if running away. The servants of the Evergarden household nervously observed him from a distance. The resolve to enter the room was not building up in him. He then attempted to motivate himself.

—*No one can become anybody's replacement. Isn't that right, me?*

Hodgins had tasted that feeling many times after becoming Violet's guardian. He had also felt lonely. But simultaneously, he had felt happy.

—*If it's me, I can give her the things that Gilbert couldn't and do that he didn't manage to.*

"Even without becoming his substitute..."

He hit the chest area of his shirt as if confirming something. He then cleared his throat and tried once more to knock on the door.

“Come in.”

Since it was her, she probably knew who was coming inside just from his footsteps. Although he had visited her room often, even Hodgins would be anxious when sneaking into a young woman’s bedroom late into the night. But the tension melted into a different emotion the next second.

“President... Hodgins. It has been a while.”

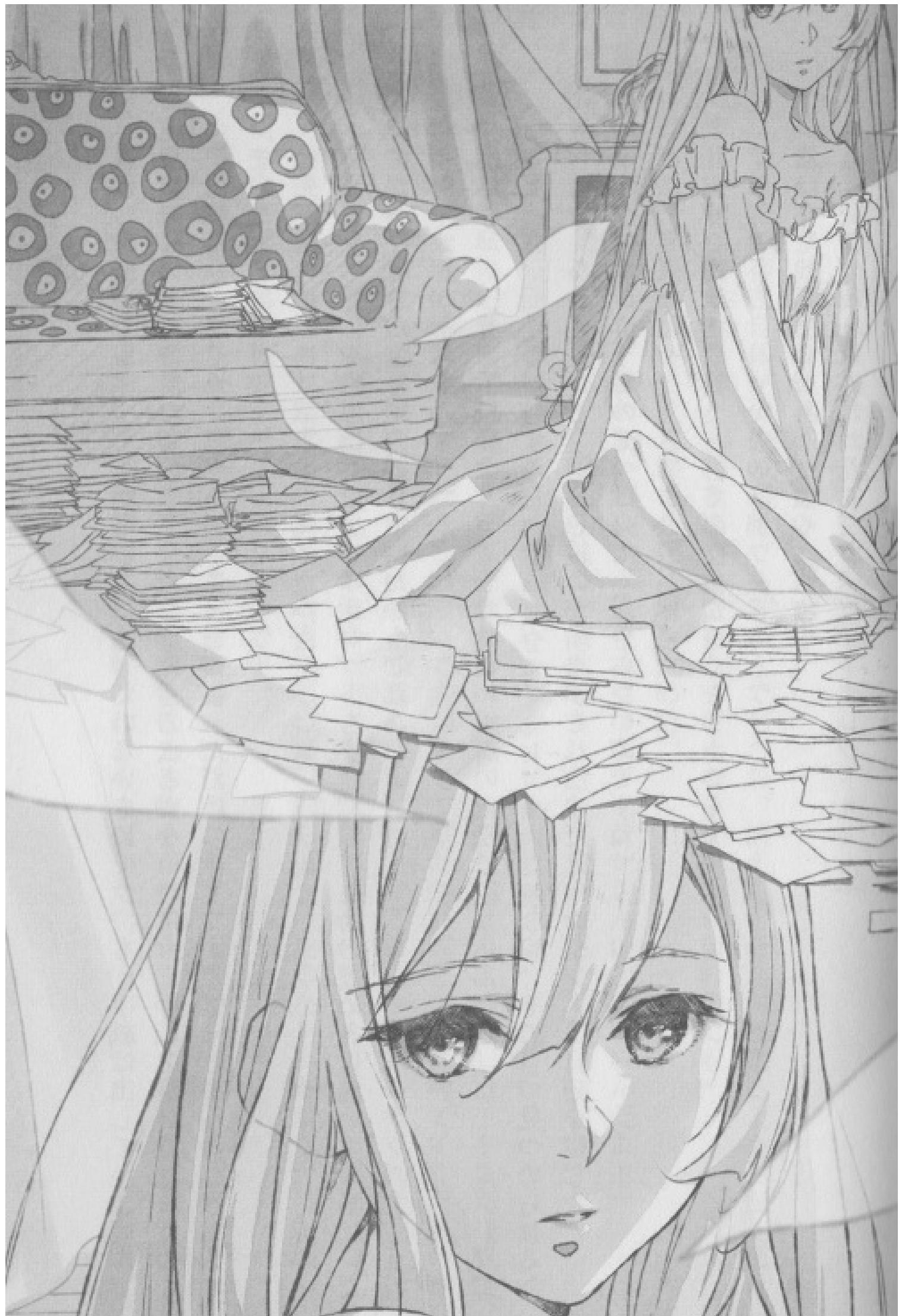
Violet Evergarden, named after a flower goddess, had become even more beautiful yet again in the few months they had not seen each other. Her figure as she wore a negligee was pure and refined. Her golden hair had become lengthier. The sight was mysterious even. She had grown into someone fitting of the name Gilbert had given her.

“Little Violet, what are you doing?” Still, what caught Hodgins’s eyes was not that. His voice quavered. He had not wanted to show much of a reaction, yet could not hide it.

Violet stared at Hodgins as he entered the room while sitting on the floor amidst a heap of disarranged letters. It was not one or two, but dozens of paper sheets piled up quietly like corpses. Dead thoughts merely existing, like continuously pouring snowfall.

She did not answer him right away. It might have been that she did not have the will to open her mouth. “I was... sorting out letters.”

“From who? I always send postcards, right?”



“Nobody... these are the ones I wrote and did not send. I no longer send letters. I understand... that there will be no reply. I simply find myself writing letters whenever I have nothing else to do, is all. There is no meaning to it. These are mere miscellanies in which I wrote about my days. I was pondering on whether I should dispose of them.”

The letters without destination were indeed corpses. And Violet, who had given birth to them, lacked the glow of life in her eyes. It could be that she was livelier during the times she spent in the battlefield.

“Little Violet...”

Hodgins sat down in-between the mountain of letters and the empty space. He positioned himself to confront her directly. When looking into Violet’s blank eyes, he felt like evading them. However, Hodgins disciplined himself with the reminder that that had been the result of continuously evading her.

“Major will... no longer come back to me, will he?”

“Yeah... he won’t.”

“Has my value as a soldier been lost... because my arms were gone?”

“That’s not it.”

“I can still fight. I can become stronger.”

“Our fight is already over, Little Violet.”

“Can I be of use aside from as weapon?”

“You’re not... anyone’s tool anymore.”

“Then, if my existence itself is a bother to Major, could you please tell him to order me to disappear? I will go anywhere. If I... if I remain as I am, I will be of no use...”

Hodgins desperately stopped his surging tears. “Don’t say... something like that... what would be of me and the Evergardens?!”

“That is... precisely... why... That is... why... I don’t know... what I... should do.” With her eyes also wet, Violet begged Hodgins, “If I... If I am unnecessary... as a tool... I should be discarded... I... am... I am... not supposed... to be cherished...”

like this... by someone... Please. Throw me away. Throw me away somewhere."

"You're not a thing. I think of you as my own daughter. Hey, I'm sorry. Listen."

"I do... not know... what... to do."

"Little Violet, I'm sorry... Really sorry. I didn't want to hurt you."

"Take me back to... where Major is. Please."

"It was just that. I'm sorry. Really sorry." Hodgins stuck a hand inside of his shirt and showed Violet an object that shone silver.

It was not an ordinary necklace but an identification card – a much needed means to identify those who had passed away in battlefields. Although soldiers degradingly joked about them being similar to dog tags, they had no problems with wearing one. But it was a completely different story for someone to be carrying what was not their own. It contained the soldiers' names and gender, and was used to confirm the identity of dead bodies whenever they were damaged beyond recognition when killed in war. Many kept their deceased comrades' tags as a memento.

The name of the person that she had been earnestly chasing after was carved in the polished identification card. Violet had learned how to write. She had frantically practiced Gilbert's name. That only read as one thing.

"Gilbert is dead."

"Violet, I love you. Please live."

Large tears spilled from Violet's eyes.

Summer ended, autumn was welcomed, winter was left behind and spring arrived. The latter was called the 'white season' in Leidenschaftlich. Trees planted all over streets of the capitol city, Leiden, would burst with white flowers during spring and the petals would create a scene similar to falling snow. During such a time, no matter where one went, the flowers would be dancing in the sky. It was a remarkable seasonal trait where one would be able to witness something that could only be seen for a short while.

A new year; a season that was wonderful for starting something.

A postal company that had just finished being built was established in the city of Leiden. Its signboard had the words “CH Postal Service”. It was not open for business yet, but the president was preparing for the occasion. There was nothing but a telephone on the desk of his office, which was still tastelessly empty.

“Are you really okay with this?” although the view from the open balcony was stunning, the postal company’s president, Claudia Hodgins, narrowed his eyes as if glaring at something.

Perhaps his words had rubbed the one on the other side of the line the wrong way, as the latter let out an exaggerated sigh.

“What you’re doing isn’t wrong. I agree about cutting ties with the military. If it’s for that, I’ll help you. I was reluctant at first, but not now. I really... want to protect that kid. While I was with her, I started feeling like this. It’s true. This is true. I want to... cherish her. But, y’know, Gilbert...” After wrapping the dog tag that he had received from Gilbert in order to lie by using it as a memento around his finger, Hodgins flipped it with his nails. “Here’s my prediction: you’ll regret this.” The life proof that was being fiddled with rotated until it converged. “Are you a foster parent and his daughter? A superior and his subordinate? You say that it’s for her sake that you play the role of guardian without being nearby, but this is just an excuse for you not to get involved too deeply with Little Violet, isn’t it? If that’s only out of affection, you should protect her by her side. You entrusted to me a child that lived by doing nothing but chase after your back, and... and... do you really think she will become happy like this?” The dog tag that Hodgins firmly grasped into his hands once again was cold. “The circumstances have, well, become better. We can move on with no more wars. But, I don’t think Little Violet is happy right now. You see, even if she had remained a soldier... even if she had remained as a tool of the military, she was glad to be by your side! She was happy! She lived on pursuing your back, and she’s still doing so, even after I told her that you were dead. You get it, right? It’s the kind of girl she is! If this continues, she’ll be like that for the rest of her life. Waiting, waiting, waiting and waiting for a master that won’t come...!”

A girl who merely forever awaited a man whom she had been informed to be

dead. Her face, her lonely blue eyes flickered in Hodgins's mind and faded.

"She's too pitiful like that! Gilbert... don't ignore that kid's will! It's a huge mistake to think you're protecting her by distancing yourself like this. I will read your future. You think you'll be fine far away from each other because you're young, strong and healthy, right? You think you'll protect yourselves until you eventually die, right? You're pretending to be at peace, right? You big idiot! People die out of the blue. Don't overestimate others or yourself. Even I might suddenly die tomorrow. Nobody can predict the cause of their own death. No one is really okay. Gilbert, when that time comes for either you or Little Violet, you'll definitely regret this and cry. Because I said so. If you end up wailing somewhere, it's not certain that I will comfort you. Though I'm your friend, I'm also Little Violet's substitute parent now. Bawl as you please and curse yourself. Listen, don't call me again until you've reconsidered! You're a huge moron...!" After yelling, Hodgins violently slammed the phone into the handset.

As his anger was not subsiding, he took off the dog tag and threw it away. The silver object that replaced the man he had wanted to hit clanged against the floor and lay on it miserably.

"Stupid bastard..."

The more Hodgins learned about Violet, the more the anguish of her existence charred his chest. And the sense of guilt from being a complicit of the very reason of her sadness tormented him.

"Stupid bastard..."

Likewise, said anguish also applied to Gilbert.

Hodgins sighed upon glancing at the dog tag he had tossed during his emotional fit, kneeling down to get it back. The name "Gilbert Bougainvillea" was written in it. Such was the name of a man that had been born in a strict household and continuously corresponded expectations. He specialized in massacring himself for the sake of others, and though Hodgins had no idea how many of himself he had murdered, his hands were most likely dyed in his own blood.

Beyond the trail of corpses he had left by constantly killing himself, Gilbert had met Violet.

He was a man who had never had something he wanted to do or that he could talk about in the way that Hodgins had of his dreams. He had quietly, serenely and deftly walked his long and narrow laid-out path. After having come to that point, Gilbert had broken said path for the first time.

Getting Violet out of the military was not as easy as putting it in words. Not even the personal connections and merits he had accumulated would suffice. If the situation were to continue permanently, Gilbert had to climb further heights – towards the apex of the pyramidal hierarchy, up to the summit where he would not let anyone berate him.

No invincible tools followed him anymore. Even as he had climbed to the top, the young woman he loved was not by his side. He had forsaken her, exactly because he loved her. He was betting everything, betting his life, killing himself in order to protect her.

“It’s full of idiots... everywhere.” Hodgins put on the dog tag once more and concealed it within his shirt.

He had only ever witnessed his best friend crying one time – when he had first seen Violet’s prosthetic arms. It was not as if Hodgins knew all about him, but at least he knew that he had never showed such a face. Hodgins had thought he was that kind of man. And that very Gilbert had cried.

“Hodgins, I have a favor to ask.”

That alone had been enough reason for him to accept it.

“My, my...”

Outside the postal company, a man and a woman banged the door while arguing with each other for some motive. Hodgins took a deep breath and headed to the entrance. The doorbell rang at the same instant that the door opened.

“Hey, so you’re here.” His expression had returned to that of the postal company’s president, Claudia Hodgins. Compared to his uplifting self, the other two had sullen faces on.

“Why did you call us over? It’s not the opening day yet, right? Also, you should teach this stupid woman some manners.”

"President, please don't leave me alone with him anymore. I have a hard time holding back to not hit him."

"Don't lie, you hit me just now! Where the hell did you 'hold back'!?"

"Now, now, you two." Perhaps he was already used to the two biting each other in the course of conversations whenever they opened their mouths. Hodgins stood impartial, without being overwhelmed, as the mediator of the dangerous verbal argument. "Benedict, Cattleya. Starting today, I want to include one more founding member for the inauguration of CH Postal Service." Although he was attempting to usher her into their midst, after confirming that a certain person was coming from the slope behind the two company employees, he stopped.

"What's with that? I haven't heard about it."

She was walking her way up the long, long slope towards them with her own feet and her own resolution. Lowering his droopy eyes, Hodgins smiled.

"President, is it a woman? Is she cute? More than me?"

"It's a girl. She's the youngest of us. She has certain circumstances. Well... all of you whom I've gathered are a bunch of weirdoes who have your own circumstances, but... she might be the most outstanding one. Her age is closer to you guys, so I want you to get along. I'd been coaxing her all this time. She finally accepted. Auto-Memories Dolls go around the whole world, so... whatever comes will be good experience for her to search for what she seeks." As the two turned around, he took her by the hand presented her to them.

The one who was reflected for the first time in their eyes was not the 'Violet' of the past.

"Let me introduce you. This is Violet Evergarden."

Violet possessed features that emanated a cold beauty, bowing formally like a doll.

Chapter 9: The Groom and the Auto-Memories Doll

The Morning Moon ascended in azure. Its faint form was not enough to overwhelm those who lived under the light of the night sky's Moon. However, just as the full moon, the moon of a gentler color that melted into the sky had a charm that would stop time and make people contemplate it. Combined with the pastoral poem-like landscape of prairies and small flowers that spread beneath it as far as the eyes could see, it was like an illustration out of a fairy tale book.

“Mom.”

Amidst such a heavenly scenery, without so much as batting a lash at the moon, a young man ran about intently. In his extreme hurry, he had dressed himself in a pair of pants and a shirt. He wore nothing but that.

The area was named Eucalypt Basin and had plenty of undeveloped land, with the distance from town to town and village to village being of about half a day. Regular service vehicles passed by only once a day, and if missed, local residents and travelers had no choice but to rely on their own feet or other means of transportation. Looking for a person in that world of rice fields seemed easy considering the small number of obstacles, but in reality, it was not.

“Mom!”

The amplitude itself was the main hindrance when pursuing someone. Thorough searches took too much time. It was difficult to notice even if a target moved from the place being looked through to another.

“Dammit, why did things turn out like this...?” the young man impatiently wiped the sweat trailing down his forehead with his shirt’s sleeve.

The feet that had been running in the fields until then had slowed down, only walking, and eventually stopped. Perhaps as he did not have time to put on shoes, he was barefoot. His feet bled, maybe from having stepped on twigs or rocks. Was the one he looked for worth a chase obsessive enough for him to acquire such injuries? The youth himself incidentally wound up reflecting on it.

In spite of the question that had been born within him and the lack of a precise answer to it, the young man resumed running. The small white flowers he stepped on were dyed in blood. The dismal pain braked his thought process.

“Call... my name, Mom.”

Should he go back or not? Abandon the one he searched for or not?

“My... name...”

If he were to choose not to, he simply had no choice but continue looking. In such circumstances, indecision was the biggest waste. For instance, perhaps a clue could be found those infinite fields.

“Ah.”

A dark red ribbon suddenly flew into the youth’s vision. The red fluttered into a world of nothing but greens, blues and whites. In front of him, a red unlike the one from the blood he had shed gently flowed in the breeze. Instinctively, he stretched his hand out to it. He slowly took into his palm what seemed like a present from the heavens.

The young man turned his head towards the direction of the wind. He could see silhouettes. They were the figures of a few people surrounding a motorcycle. One of them had left the spot and was running towards him. Once closer, he could tell it was a woman. On top of that, she had a captivating beauty. Her golden hair hovering amongst scattering flower petals, she stopped before the youth and stared intensely at his face.

“Hum...”

Her blue orbs held a mysterious charm and made him feel as if they stripped him naked.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. I rush anywhere my customer desires. I am from the automated dolls service, Violet Evergarden.” Like a puppet, she bowed gracefully.

Much like her appearance, the sound that came out of her finely shaped crimson lips was lovable and pure, but the contents of her words were mismatched for such a place. The young man was no customer of hers either,

nothing but a stranger.

Perhaps thinking the same as him, she corrected herself, “I made a mistake. Pardon me. This is like an occupational disease; I end up automatically saying my introduction speech to whomever I meet for the first time...”

“No... it’s okay. Erm... I’m Silene. Could this be yours?”

As she nodded mutely, Silene handed her the ribbon. He himself was surprised at how much he trembled as their fingertips touched. Although covered by gloves, her fingers felt stiff and were obviously not human.

“Here you go. Also, there’s something I want to ask. I’m looking for someone...”

“A silver-haired woman in her 60’s who specializes in hairdressing?”

“Y-Yes. My mother used to work as a hairdresser in the past... How did you...?”

The girl held down her hair, unraveling in the wind due to being untied, and pointed at the direction she had come from. Despite hardly visible because of the distance, a short person that he believed to be his mother was there.

“We were looking for you as well.”

No matter what she did, she was a woman beautiful enough to become a painting, Silene thought.

The ones who had taken care of Silene’s mother were an Auto-Memories Doll and a postman in the middle of a journey. It seemed they were on standstill as their motorcycle had malfunctioned, and had sighted his mother wandering around the meadows.

“She said she was going up to the mountains to look for her husband and son. It’s weird for someone to be walking around wearing rolls at early morning, right? We were already having problems, but when people see someone even more troubled than themselves, they stay composed. V.” while fumbling with the defective motorcycle, the man opened a hand towards the young woman.

“My name is not ‘V’. It is ‘Violet’.” Placing her side-locks behind her ear, she squatted down. Taking a tool from a bag lying on the ground, she handed it to

the man.

Ignoring her remark, he resumed working silently. “Take a look at V’s hair. She said it was pretty and asked ‘please let me touch it’, so we let her play with it just like that. I was caught up over here. V was entertaining the Granny. And then you showed up.”

“My mother... is a little... wrong in the head... We’ve caused you trouble.”

“Seems so... well, fellows like that aren’t rare. It’s easy for thoughts and memories to become confusing on their own. You don’t even have to be old for that to happen... It’s not working... Enough. Gimme a hand towel.” Easily wiping off black oil stains, he stood up.

He was a bit taller than Violet. His light blond hair was of a shade that resembled sand. His hairline was short, yet a part of his forelocks hung lengthier on one side. His cool, sky blue orbs bore thorns within their softness.

Just by looking at the curves of his body, one could tell he was wearing tight laser pants. In contrast, his upper part was clad in a loose spring-green shirt and suspenders. The heels of his boots were too tall. Said heels were cross-shaped. It was quite a flashy get-up. However, even if he took off all of it, he had the looks of someone that could effortlessly lead a woman or two by the nose.

“This... is completely hopeless. Out of all things, for it to break in the middle of this countryside that has nothing but grassland is just...” The man roughly wiped off a bead of sweat with his arm. He seemed rather fatigued.

“Benedict, I really should run to the city we parted from and request help. It is faster to go back than go forth.”

“Hum, then...”

Not hearing Silene’s attempted statement, the man – Benedict – scowled at Violet’s words. “Even if you possess a strength so ridiculous that it’s almost like a joke, there’s no way I could let a woman do that alone. Even if you say that way is closer, it’s still pretty distant. Also, the outcome would be that I’d be scolded by the Old Man.”

Violet slightly tilted her neck. “Is that so? Benedict, you are already clearly exhausted by the everyday postal deliveries and take on the additional duty of

picking me up along the way, so in this situation, is it not better for the one with more stamina to make a move? Being male or female is unrelated. This decision is for the sake of our survival.”

“Hum, like I said...”

“Nope, I can already see it. Old Man going like, ‘Benedict... you... why did you make Little Violet do something like that? You made her run?’ and then criticize me about the manners of a gentleman that he’s so good at.”

What he impersonated with so much emotion was most likely an imitation of a certain postal company’s boss.

“You... will answer anything when asked, right? You can’t lie.”

“I do not lie to President. There are only truths in my reports.”

“Then, isn’t it no good after all?”

“I will tell the truth but I will give you cover, Benedict. I will say that I was the one who proposed it.”

“Your covering fire is the best when it comes to actual ammo but it’s fruitless effort when it comes to everyday conversations, so stop that.”

“Hum!” As Silene spoke loudly, the two finally looked his way.

Perhaps tired from walking so much, his mother was asleep as he carried her on his back. Violet brought her index finger next to her lips.

Silene smiled bitterly. “If you’re having a hard time, I’ll guide you to my village as thanks for taking care of my mother. Can you push the motorcycle? If you can go on pushing, it might take a little while, but I’ll show you to someone who can fix it.”

“You’d do that?”

Silene nodded. “The village is a bit crowded at the moment, so it will take some time... that’s right. If you could... stay there for a day, we could work it out. We do receptions as well. To tell the truth, a wedding is going to happen. In this region, whenever someone is getting married, the entire village gathers to open banquets. During them, we invite and welcome anyone. It’s coincidentally the best time to entertain guests.”

“Do you have drinks?”

“Of course.”

“What about dancer girls and good food? Also, places to sleep.”

“About women, erm... Mister Benedict. It would depend on you, but we’ve got everything else ready.”

After balling his fists and revering the heavens, Benedict turned to Violet and offered both hands. Violet stared at them fixatedly.

“You do it like this. Like this.” Benedict vehemently took Violet’s hand and made her raise it together with his. “We did it.”

“We did it?”

“You don’t have to do that much.” Benedict laughed. “This is part of that thing called fate. I have no idea who they are, but let’s join the toast of this happy couple.”

Silene also laughed at Benedict’s words. Upon looking once at his mother on his back, his smile soon disappeared, but he forced himself to muster out a cheerful voice, “Yes, I’m from the household of this happy couple.”

The place Silene led them to was a village named Kisara. Its houses had been built as to form a semicircle. In its center was a hall with a stone pavilion and a well. Most likely, they were the only things in that space at first, but currently, a crowd crammed around the pavilion. It was filled with women to the point that one could ponder whether every woman in the village had assembled there. They were vigorously cooking and decorating the hall with ornaments.

Violet and Benedict observed the scene as if it were something unusual. As Benedict asked Silene where the men were, the latter pointed at a set of tents located just a little apart from the village. The lined-up tents made of colorful cloths shone outstandingly against the blue skies and green land. It appeared they were being put up to serve as temporary bedding for guests. By the looks of it, those people truly meant to warmly welcome whoever came by without rebuffing anyone.

For the time being, the group was headed to Silene’s home. The village’s only

roadway was narrow and full of things – flowers blooming all over wooden vats placed by the front doors, dried crops, cats slipping past their legs. From somewhere in that midst, the sound of bells rang. Silene explained how several chimes that produced sound by colliding with each other upon being blown by the wind were the village's specialty articles of folk craft.

Looking upwards, they could see cords passed through the houses' windows across the street, from which their residents' laundry hung. Chimes hung from them as well. Young girls chatting with one another pulled in the cords as though having fun. While they did so, the chimes simultaneously rang. When Benedict turned his gaze towards them, they let out a laughter akin to a scream and closed the windows.

The village had a tranquility that did not exist in big cities, characteristic of small communities.

Once they had passed the narrow road, it broadened at once, and beyond it was an isolated house that was bigger than the rest. Although not so well tended to, bushes of roses grew in its garden. Two anxious-looking women stood in front of the entrance.

“Aah, so she was all right?!” The one who rushed over as fast as she could was a middle-aged lady clad in an apron dress.

After a deep sigh, Silene spoke to her in a low tone, “Don’t ‘she was all right’ me. Are you okay with this? Don’t tell me this always happens...”

“Yesterday night, I had properly locked Madame’s room. Master, could it be you went there afterwards? Did you lock it? It only opens from outside.”

“That’s...”

“For the few years that everything has been entrusted to Master, I haven’t gone looking for Madame like that.”

“My bad. That was my bad...”

The air of their exchange could not be described as pleasant.

The other woman walked to Silene’s side. She had brown skin and gracious facial features. She bowed her head to Violet and Benedict, who wordlessly

watched everything. It was then that Silene finally realized there was someone other than his relative beside him.

"S-Sorry... I'll introduce you. This is... erm... the one who will become my wife tomorrow, Misha. And my mother's servant, Delit. I don't live with my mother. Misha, Delit. Those two took care of Mom."

They understood how much the last statement meant they were supposed to show gratitude towards the duo with the expression he showed right after. Both Delit and Misha let them into the house as if dealing with saints. Following that, they had a busy time. The bride and groom, who were about to marry the next day, seemed to have greetings to give in various places, and so had gone out by themselves. They apologized for being unable to entertain the guests appropriately, yet Violet and Benedict were satisfied enough just by having a place with a roof to cool down at and saw them off without minding it.

As it was close to midday, the servant Delit treated the travelers to a meal out of consideration. Perhaps due to being significantly tired, Benedict wound up falling asleep immediately after eating, as if his battery had run out. At first, he had started nodding off, and soon, unable to withstand it, he rested his body against the sofa and closed his eyes.

The work of a postman consisted of all-day delivery duties. Moreover, he had driven to pick up Violet on the way of his trip, and as his motorcycle had broken, he had worried about the repairs, therefore becoming completely exhausted.

Seated on the same sofa, Violet silently allowed him to sleep by her side as he leaned against her, and once everything became quiet, she finally observed the environment. There were chimes on the house's window as well. They rang in jingles. The sounds of Delit washing dishes could be heard from the kitchen. Along with Benedict's sleeping breath, the afternoon of an extremely peaceful summer day ensued.

Albeit not feeling sleepy, Violet closed her eyes. It was as if she had come to know the gentleness of the sounds of everyday life composed her surroundings for the first time. Her new home, the Evergarden household, was a mansion which size could not be matched unless so many of the village's houses were

put together, and therefore, it was strange for her to be in a house where she could merely exist and relax without having to do any work. However, as soon as she heard a clatter coming from the front door, she reached for the handgun inside her jacket.

“My, my. Might it be the person that will fix the motorcycle?” her footsteps echoing, Delit walked up to the entrance.

Looking at her side, Violet could see Benedict thinly opening his eyes. He also had his fingers on his handgun. “It is all right to continue sleeping.” She told him, and he closed his eyes again as if relieved.

The two of them were slightly alike. Due to their hair and irises being of similar colors, they almost looked like siblings when next to one another.

Wondering if there were anything she could do to offer assistance, Violet was about to head to the entrance as well, but upon noticing that someone was calling amidst the everyday life sounds, her feet halted. She had heard it coming from the second floor. She then remembered that Silene’s mother had been taken to it as though being pushed back when they had arrived at that house. Climbing the wooden stairs, Violet stood at the corridor of the second floor and stayed put to listen once more.

“Darling...?” The voice of an elderly woman resounded. “Or could it be Jonah?”

She was most likely mistaking Violet for a family member.

“It is Violet. You tied my hair this morning.” As if replying to her, Violet whispered by the room’s door.

It was a small village, yet the banquet would gather all of it. One by one, they bowed their heads in gratitude to everybody. It was by the time the Sun had set that Silene and Misha had gone home.

“My, the bride is not from around here?”

“She understands our language. But her speech is broken. It’s cute.”

“Silene, treat her well. Doesn’t it feel like she can only rely on you?”

Giving greetings had not made him feel particularly disturbed, but after them,

he was pryingly interrogated by older women about his fiancée, Misha. As Silene had done most of the talking on behalf of the timid Misha, who was not too good at conversations, his throat was parched.

“It’s gotten dark, huh?” Misha muttered curtly and Silene nodded.

The village would normally be calm at sunset, but today, it had been rather noisy. Everyone is was on festive spirits. Just when he was thinking that everything was for his and Misha’s sake, Silene had come to understand that a wedding ceremony was not only for two people. He then took hold of Misha’s hand in a natural manner.

“Fufu.” She let out a shy giggle. “The people of this village... are kind.” Perhaps feeling at ease when speaking only to Silene, she started talking. “My brother, who had raised me in place of our parents, passed away in the Great War. I’m glad I’m able to marry you. I was able to... have a family again.” She smiled bashfully. “Miss Delit is great at cooking. She has taught me what foods you like. Mother’s house... is big. It’s grandiose, and makes me think... that everyone can live in it.”

Although it was a peaceful chatter, Silene wound up coldly spitting out, “You don’t have to be so cautious.”

Misha’s stopped walking. Her hand, still connected with his, was pulled as he continued going ahead, causing her to stumble. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m... sorry too.”

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry... I said something... uncalled for. I... even... know... that you left that house because you hate it and your mother.”

What Silene had become enamored with in Misha was exactly that. She was honest, caring and kind.

“But, I haven’t properly asked why you hate them. It’s better to cherish your parents.”

And she had principles.

Sweat beaded in the hand he was using to hold hers. Silene wanted to let go to wipe it but did not do so, instead tightening his grip even more. He did not

wish to instigate disgust in the person that would always be by his side from then on.

“Nothing... gets through Mom.”

Unlike Silene, who would not meet her eyes, Misha directed her gaze straight at him. “Yes.”

“It’s been that way since I was little. She isn’t like that because of her age. I used to have a father too, and... an older brother... but one day, my father took my brother and left.”

“Why...?”

“I was too small so I don’t remember it well. It was probably... the usual... their relationship as a married couple was bad. They... fought very often. I had seen either of them stomp out of home a lot. That’s why I thought he would surely be back soon that time too...”

But he had not returned.

—*Back then, why did Dad take Brother and not me?*

Was it because his brother was the firstborn? Their age gap was of only three years, yet he had always felt that his father would prioritize his brother in whatever he did. For instance, in the order of giving away presents, frequency with which he would pat their heads, or the difference of the words he used to praise them. From others’ point of view, none those would be a big deal, but children are sensitive to such things.

—*I’m sure... he took the one he was most attached to. That’s what I feel.*

“From that point on, Mom started getting weird. Slowly, slowly... she broke, like a screw falling off a machine. First, she started calling me by my brother’s name. Whenever I would say, ‘no, I’m not Jonah, I’m Silene’, she’d apologize and correct herself. But it didn’t stop at just saying the wrong name.”

Misha placed her other hand along the one that was joined with his. She was attempting to smolder the hardships that her lover had faced during his life. It was but a simple gesture, yet it made Silene unbearably contented. He was able to strongly reconfirm that it was something he had yearned for.

“Mom started to hallucinate that I’m either Dad or big brother Jonah.”

His past self did not have such joys.

“When she thinks I’m Dad, she scolds me while crying and hits me. When she thinks I’m Brother, she simply hugs me and asks where I’d been. This has continued on for several years.”

Silene did not think of himself as pitiful.

“But, see, when I got my growth spurt, I became taller. I actually don’t resemble Brother or Dad at all. I really... think that was... a good thing.”

However, he also did not think of himself as a happy one. In retrospect to his childhood, there was never anything enjoyable. He had to start working as his mother became unable to, and would be feeling miserable when coming home.

“I was free from being mistaken with someone else.”

It was a succession of occurrences.

“But then a new curse was cast on me.”

A sorrowful succession of occurrences.

“Now I’m the one that doesn’t know who I am.”

In order to put an end to them, he had to be apart from her.

“Mom also doesn’t know who I am. She only remembers the me from my childhood. Delit told me... that she’s been looking for me lately. Isn’t it... kinda laughable? I had always, always, always...”

Precisely because they were family, he had to be apart from her.

“...always been by her side.”

Although it could be considered heartless, that was the last thing Silene wanted to give up on. The villagers already knew, but it was his first time discussing it with an outsider. He had grown up, learned how to work, launched himself into the outside world, fallen in love with a girl he had found there and was at last freed from his sadness. He would not let anyone interfere with that.

“That’s why I won’t live with Mom.”

Silene was desperate to haul the happiness that he had finally managed to grasp onto with his own hands.

As they got home, Delit came to greet them outside with a, “I’ve been waiting for you.” She was holding several letters in her hands. They had brought about a huge incident in the absence of the two. Congratulatory telegrams from far-away friends and relatives who would not be able to make it to the ceremony had arrived.

The town Silene and Delit lived in was at a short distance from the village. He had actually wanted to hold the ceremony there and leave his mother out, but Misha had not agreed to it. “If you have at least one parent, you should show it to her,” she had told him. For that reason, the people they were currently associated with had become unable to attend.

“What should we do about these... according to marriage etiquette?” Silene coyly asked the old Delit.

“Well, they must be wholeheartedly recited. Haven’t you requested anyone to do that?”

Silene turned to face Misha. The couple had not been taught by the nearby elderly one about situations in which they would have to make requests and were unfamiliar with nuptial protocol.

“We’re in trouble... if it has to be someone from this area... maybe the lady from the general store?”

“No way... we can’t ask so suddenly. The ceremony is tomorrow.”

“Then, Master, this means you also haven’t thought about your love poem for the bride. You have to do that too.”

It was a traditional custom for the bridegroom reciting a poem written by himself containing his feelings towards his loved one in the middle of the ceremony.

“I was thinking about not making one since it’s embarrassing...”

“That’s no good! A wedding ceremony without that... would be a disappointment to the people invited.”

Upon being admonished with an incredibly threatening attitude, Silene shrank back.

“Holding a ceremony in our land means getting ready and spending efforts so that we can share a wonderful moment in exchange of being congratulated by many people. We cannot discard traditions. Everyone... is volunteering for a lot of things, aren’t they? That’s due to mutual support and encouragement. You’ll be damned if you don’t earnestly correspond to that sincerity.”

“B-But...”

Who in the world were they supposed to seek for help?

Perhaps as they were having a heated debate, one of their guests opened the window and poked her head out as if inquiring what was going on. She held a letter in her hand as well.

“Aah, isn’t there someone who’s just perfect for the job?!”

“No, but... they’re guests.”

“But she’s an Auto-Memories Doll, right? Isn’t recitation and writing their forte? Master, you can leave it to her.”

Despite Delit’s optimistic words, Silene’s constraint was more prominent, rendering him unable to say anything.

“I accept.”

“Eh?”

“I accept. I will take on the reciting and writing... as a one-night favor.”

Unexpectedly, Violet was the one to assume the responsibility. Not even a full day had passed since they had met, yet he somehow felt he would not be able to say such things himself. Silene thought she was a modest woman.

“It is an important ceremony, after all.”

The words of Violet Evergarden weighted heavily on Silene’s heart.

The bridal costume from the outskirts of Eucalypt Basin consisted of a red robe with detailed goldthread embroidery. On the bride’s head lay a flower crown, and a rose-colored make-up was applied on her eyelids and lips. In

contrast, the groom was clad in a white robe. He carried a shield that represented the protection of their household and a small sword painted in gold, as it was a symbol of wealth.

The groom and bride walked receiving blessings from the people in the street that morning. Afterwards, a banquet was held in the village's hall. The stage of the ceremony, which the female villagers had been preparing since the day before, turned out splendid. The hall's pavilion was decorated with white seven-sisters and red roses and two seats made of vines were set up. A long tables and chairs had been lined up as to surround the pavilion and guests were already seated on them. They greeted the arrival of the young couple with applause.

Only on such day, those who would usually be working assiduously were also dressed up and participating. Gorgeous ornamental hats, vividly colorful dresses. And adults are not the only ones dressed up. The figures of children running and walking around with angel feather ornaments on their backs were adorable.

Once the ceremony began, an orchestra started playing and the food was served. Next, it was time to dance for a while. Initially, the women that received dance lessons displayed a group choreography. People gradually mixed up with it, but when the blond postman made his entrance, the cheers from female villagers rose. As Benedict danced about brilliantly in boots much like the ones women wore, after he was done, rather than being by both of his arms, young lady villagers as pretty as flowers cornered him from all sides and caused an uproar.

Violet Evergarden, who had offered to do the recitation, did not do anything as flashy as Benedict. She simply stood still and awaited her cue in silence. Perhaps because of her almost mystical beauty, she did not become a target of the men's flirting, and not even a single person with enough courage to as much as talk to her had come by.

By the time it was finally her turn, she caused the attendees' eyes to glue on her with the conglomerate of telegrams. There was not even any need to say "quiet down" in order to silence those who were causing a ruckus. So long as there was something that they wished to hear, people would fall silent on their

own.

Regardless of the anxious couple, the ceremony went on free from disturbances for the villagers who were already used to it. Misha quietly whispered into Silene's ear, "It seems this will end well, right?"

Although she was his own bride, she looked so beautiful that he was slightly startled when her face drew closer. "Yeah, really... this is thanks to the people of the village."

"Your love poem... was wonderful." After saying so, Misha laughed a bit. It was probably because his figure had looked funny in her eyes as he ended up mumbling the love poem he had dedicated to her, due to becoming stiff as a statue out of nervousness.

"Miss Violet wrote most of it, though..."

"That's right. I had never... been told such things."

"Don't tease me so much... I'm no good with embarrassing stuff."

"It's great that we were able to meet such wonderful travelers. Mother also seemed to have enjoyed herself."

"It'll be good if that's true." Silene's voice was a little down.

He had constantly prayed that she would stay put at least on that day, yet she had started aimlessly loitering around by the middle of the ceremony and begun looking for him by the latter half of it, so as per his request, Delit had taken her back home. As the villagers knew of the circumstances, there was no commotion on their part – rather, the one that had become disconcerted was Silene.

—*So embarrassing.*

He felt as if the most important day of his life had been ruined by his heartbroken mother.

—*I'm glad that the one I married was Misha.*

There were surely people who would have become irate had the same happened to them. Just as himself.

—*I'm glad... that it was Misha.*

Silene took Misha's hand, tracing the wedding ring he had put on it with a finger. It was a proof that he was no longer alone. The way that very ring felt gave him a sense of reality.

“Lastly, here is a letter by the precious mother of the groom, containing her blessings for the marriage of her son, Sir Silene, who has chanced upon the marvelous day that is today.”

An incessant clapping outburst at Violet's words. Silene confusedly turned his head to every direction. Misha seemed to think it were yet another program of the event and accepted it, but Silene had not been told about such a thing by anyone.

“Lady Fran, I humbly thank you for allowing us to be sitting in such an honorable place along with all of you.” Violet took out a letter similar to the one she had been holding the evening before and opened its envelope. “By your respectable mother's request, I shall vocally deliver to Sir Silene the letter of marital blessings that is packed with feelings.”

—*I haven't heard about it. I haven't... heard about any of this.*

Was it not better for him to stop her? There was no way the words said by a heartbroken person could be of any decency. The place would merely become disheveled by her strange manner of speech and conduct. Silene attempted to rise from his seat.

However, the blue orbs of the Auto-Memories Doll seemed to sew his own shadow onto him as she entreated for restraint on the spot, “It might become a little abstract, but please do listen to it.” A sigh escaped Violet's rose-like lips. As if reciting, she read out the blessing poem, “I know that the most beautiful version of myself is the one reflected in your eyes. That is because I cherish you as if I were admiring a flower. I can see the gleam of stars in your pupils. That is because I think of you as dazzling. You did not know how to speak when you were small. I taught you words so that you would be able to, right? The color of the sky, the coldness of night dew, the lines you would spout when doing bad things... if only I could convey to you the joy I felt when talking with you about them. I wonder if you have realized that any harsh words I ever directed at you

were out of love too. Similarly, no matter how much you may have hurt me, the fact that you were born erases all of it. You do not know that, do you? My son. Do you know the beauty in the eyes of the person you will be together with for the rest of your life from now on? Can you remember what color they are even after closing your own eyes? Do they shine? If you look beautiful when reflected in her orbs, you are loved by her. You must never let that become lax. You must not neglect love. A light can keep on shining precisely when it is polished. That jewel is in only your care. Do not neglect love. My son. Have you ever peeked into my eyes? If not, then by all means, try doing so. They are already enveloped in a world of night, but stars twinkle in the night sky. Please, just quietly peek into them. If you think that what surfaces in my eyes – what is reflected in them – is beautiful, that means you love me. I cannot speak much. That is why, please, take a peek. Please do that whenever you become restless. Wherever you go, my eyes should be able to become one of the beautiful things that exist in this world for you. This is the truth of a promise between you and me. My son, this is my love towards you. So, please, do not forget the color of my eyes.”

The applause started out as a noiseless ripple and gradually morphed into the great swirl of a wave. After bowing beautifully in an Auto-Memories Doll-like way, Violet stepped aside.

Silene could not remember his mother's eye color. He had been with her today and the day before.

“Silene? Are you okay?”

Nevertheless, he could not recall it. He had avoided looking at her face. And he had done so on purpose.

“Silene.”

Being called by someone else's name whenever they locked eyes was too hard for him. It was painful that he did not have what his mother sought after. No matter what he did, he was unable to correspond her expectations.

“Hey, Silene.”

If the one his father had taken away had been Silene himself instead of his brother, perhaps his mother's heart would not have been damaged to that

extent.

“Hey, Darling.”

If she were not with a son that would make his father and mother think of him as unnecessary, but a better one...

—*So embarrassing.*

The reason why he was no good with embarrassing things...

—*So embarrassing.*

...was that they would cause him to become aware...

—*So embarrassing.*

...that he was an embarrassing existence to someone else.

“Darling, don’t cry.”

As Misha wiped his tears, he realized that he was crying. He hurried to turn backwards. More tears poured.

—*So embarrassing. So embarrassing. I am... so embarrassing.*

The Auto-Memories Doll’s letter made his chest ache. He was embarrassed of having dragged with him the past he was unable to love until the present moment and running away from the person he was supposed to protect. His mother, despite thinking he was gone, and despite being broken, had gone out to look for him.

“Sorry, I’ll leave the seat for a bit.” He informed Misha and walked away from the ceremony.

“Are you headed to where Mother is?”

As he kept his eyelids still and nodded at the question, she pushed his back.

“Off you go.”

While thinking he was the worst groom ever for abandoning the ceremony, he paced past the guests. Even with him leaving, the attendees had become exalted as the time to dance had come once again.

He went past the narrow road, towards the house he had lived in with his

mother. Silene's legs hurried to the house that he had left as if running away. As he arrived by its front, Violet Evergarden, who was supposed to be at the ceremonial hall, was there. He could not see Benedict's motorcycle anywhere. The repairs had most likely been completed.

"We are much obliged."

It seemed they planned to depart without seeing the end of the ceremony.

"Same here. Hum... thank you very much. I took notice of my failures... with the words I received. Mom told you some sort of nonsense... and you... wrote it beautifully into a letter just like that, right? She made you do something so troubling... She... often makes selfish requests. It was like that even back when we lived together. Even today, when she was told that it was the day of the wedding ceremony, she was adamant that we gave her a white hat that had already been sold ages ago..."

"I am sorry for having done this on my own accord."

"No, it's fine..."

"While Sir Silene and Lady Misha were out, I accepted a job offer from your mother. The offer was only for me to deliver the letter, but I ended up doing something intrusive. Your mother said that you might not have read the letter if she had given it to you, Sir Silene... I, too, chose a method of definitively transmitting her words to you. Since there is no letter... that needn't be delivered." Violet said.

Silene's brows furrowed. He could picture his mother making the request. However, he thought it was odd for her to say he might not have read it.

"I wonder why my mother would say this... that I might not read the letter."

"She said it was because she was always causing problems to Sir Silene. Since, due to losing part of the family, she wound up hammering you with lonely memories."

—*That's a lie.*

"No, that's weird."

"What is?"

—*That's a lie, that's a lie.*

“She's... not supposed to say anything so reasonable. She says things like ‘I want to do this’ or ‘I want to do that’. But... that's weird. It's almost like... I mean...”

—*There's no way.*

“It is not weird. All the while when talking to me, your mother was lucid. When we first met, too, she was like that for a moment. She talked about you.”

—*There's no way.*

Silene staggered to pass by Violet's side and opened the house's entrance.

From behind him, Violet's voice resounded, “Well, then, we will take our leave.”

Without bothering to even turn around, he climbed up the stairs and headed to the front of a room in the second floor. What was his mother currently doing in that room which could only be locked from the outside? Taking off the padlock, he spun the doorknob. The window was probably open. Wind was circulating in the room.

His mother was by said window, observing the center of the village where the ceremony was taking place.

“M-Mom.” He called. “Mom.” He called for her countless times in that manner.

His mother stirred her head towards him, but her gaze immediately returned to the window. “Hey, quiet down... Jonah.”

She rarely ever turned to look at him.

“Mom... Mom... M-Mom...”

Ever since their family fell apart, there had not been a single occasion in which she had looked at him soberly.

“I'm onto something very important right now.”

Not even one.

“I wonder where Silene is.”

“Mom, I’m... right here.” He let out a childish voice.

As he did so, his mother’s body twitched once as if startled, and she slowly turned around. She eyed Silene from head to toe with apparent interest. Her gaze was not the same as ever.

Silene stared back into his mother’s orbs. They were of a stunning amber hue.

—*Aah, that’s right. That was their color.*

He remembered that her irises were of the same color as his own.

His mother walked to his side, and with a hand of increasing brown spots, she touched his cheek. All along, he was shedding tears.

“My... don’t cry.” She seemed happy. “You’ve grown so much, huh, Silene.”

Only Silene dwelled within her amber eyes.

“Congratulations... on your marriage.” She smiled.

During that instant, his mother undoubtedly had sanity. It was lost by the moment Silene embraced her.

“Hey, where’s Silene?”

“I’m... not going anywhere anymore.”

However, her love definitely existed.

Chapter 10: The Demigod and the Auto-Memories Doll

Translator Note: Here's a warning beforehand to avoid confusion – this chapter was written with POV switch for some reason. The narration swings from first to third person within every one or two chapter intervals. I honestly thought about translating it all in third person, but that felt like lying to the readers, so I left it as it is in the original work.

On that day, the sky was overcast since morning, white clouds blending with pitch darkness. Rain struck the land as the Sun set, thunders rumbling, in a weather stormy enough to shake even windows protected by iron bars.

“It’s become cold, hasn’t it?”

Although it was the beginning of autumn, the temperature had still been warm as of late. Perhaps due to it abruptly going down, the nun whom I had been reading scriptures aloud with stood up and started preparing the fireplace that had been unused since spring.

I dropped my gaze to the scriptures we were halfway through with, and then scanned the room. A bed with a canopy. A gold-frame painting of mythological gods. An antique mirror stand. A deep shadow was cast over all of them. The atmosphere was somewhat grim.

“Hey...” As staying silent was dreadful, I tried calling out to the nun, yet was interrupted by a booming thunder. The sound was deafening enough to crack the soil. It sent chills through my entire body from within the silk robes I wore.

The navy-blue fabrics with golden embroidery of said robes were suitable for the austerity of a god’s child, but did not match me. The same went for the circlet of the Sun being enveloped by the Moon that rested on my head, that room, everything...

I stood up from my chair and walked to the nun’s side.

“Everything is fine, Lady Lux. This region has always been often hit by lightning, so there are lightning rods installed around the Utopia. Besides, even if it were to strike us, nothing would happen to you, Lady Lux. Your honorable body will be safe until the Day of Guidance four days from now.”

At the words that came with a light smile, I could only laugh bitterly. That was because I was unable to deem them either good or bad, as they were simply neutral words of comfort.

“Excuse me.” the voice of another nun came from outside the room. It was most likely the one in charge of the administrative management and security of the Utopia.

“Is anything the matter, Lisbon?”

“This rain caused the nearby river to flood. Crossing the bridge over to the harbor side in these circumstances is unmanageable...”

“We have stored enough supplies to survive through even the winter. There should be no issues, right?”

“No, it is not that... Since the crossing has become impossible, a traveler who was wandering this land has come seeking shelter in this Utopia. She asked if she could stay until the storm calmed... There is no way we could treat a lost child with disdain. It was all right to welcome her into the gates, but... that traveler...”

Seeing as the eyes of the reporting nun shone in delight, I concluded that something had happened. “Is she a ‘demigod’ like me?” after asking, my heart started racing from fear mixed with joy and sorrow mixed with anticipation, so violently that it ached.

“We have not conducted any probation, so I cannot affirm it, but... her figure is the splitting image of the goddess of combat, Garnet Spear. She is exactly as described in the scriptures.”

“Rainy days are ominous, so isn’t someone that comes by in times like these a mere human instead of a ‘demigod’? I believe I should recommend she departs to the lower world immediately after the tempest settles.”

My voice might have been stiff. Although I was praised and worshipped as a

‘demigod’ in that utopia, I did not have communication skills. However, I thought I had to do what I could for the sake of that traveler.

The two nuns looked at one another.

“Either way, let’s welcome the traveler. She must be freezing in this rain.”

“I-I want to meet this person as well.”

“We’ll let you greet her after you arrange yourself. Please, Lady Lux, be at ease.”

With that, the nuns left me in the room and took their leave in a haste. As the door was latched, it did not budge even as I pushed it.

“Hey, open up. Isn’t there anyone here?”

I could not hear the sounds of people in the corridors. I sighed grievously. As I had nothing else to do, I took a peek at the window. I did not have a panoramic view due to the window bars, but I could perfectly see the front gates.

“Ah.” My eyes reflected the figure of a traveler standing outside without any rain gear.

There was a fair distance from the room I was in to the ground. I kept observing her warily while believing that there was no way she would perceive my stare, yet she promptly moved her neck to look straight at me. It seemed my breathing would stop. The fact that my gaze had been noticed was frightening, but more than anything, the reason was that I could tell, even from far away, that the beauty of that traveler was a gift from God.

That was the first meeting between I, Lux Sibyl, and Violet Evergarden.

That isolated island contained something mysterious. The name of said island surrounded by sea and separated from other continents was Chevalier. There were about a hundred islanders in it.

As it was, the island was blessed with natural resources, and there was no contact with the outside world except for passing ships. The main characteristics of Chevalier were the waterfalls and ponds found throughout its territory. And among them, the most prominent was the great waterfall on the peak of an abysmal mountain in the center of the island. The maximum drop

distance was of about a hundred meters, and there was no one who could float up if swallowed by the plunge basin.

Aside from the great waterfall, there was one more peculiarity in the island of water and greenery named Chevalier: a bizarre fortress erected by stacking irregular stones on top of one another. It was said that such spire devoid of uniformity, which artistic architecture had been created with the intention of not being labeled as either Oriental or Occidental, had suddenly started being built by a lunatic. In reality, no one knew whether that was true or not. Until a few decades before, it was a secretive building, left untouched as it was. One day, after a group that had purchased a corner of the island suddenly migrated to it at once, the community already living in that island started calling them "Cult House", while the fortress's inhabitants themselves called it "Utopia".

Sister Lisbon, who had received the task of guiding the traveler that had wandered into the Utopia, was fixatedly staring at the entrance of a spacious porch that served as the Utopia's front gate. What she was observing was not the state of the storm outside but the female traveler as she undid her slovenly hair. Its golden strands were glossy from absorbing rainwater. Her complex braids delayed its real length.

In her hands covered by black gloves was a heavy-looking trolley bag. Under the Prussian blue jacket that she took off was a snow-white ribbon-tie dress. Perhaps due to being so wet, it stuck to her bodyline perfectly, and even those of the same sex would have trouble averting their eyes from the sight.

The woman was a beautiful person with a somber gaze, and her figure, softly wet from the rain, happened to look as pure and lustrous as a fairy. However, she was enveloped in a somewhat outlandish atmosphere. Despite her fragile appearance, a bottomless, raw strength was present somewhere within her.

"I will be in your care." Although the woman's voice was by no means loud, in such a quiet place, it resounded more exquisitely than it usually would.

Lisbon led the woman to a room used whenever there were visitors. She sat on said room's sofa by a marble table. Maybe because of the current season, or because building was made of stones, the air in the room felt cold.

"I am the administrator of the management of this 'Utopia'. My name is

Lisbon. We of Utopia welcome you, who were once lost.”

The outer corner of her eyes full of wrinkles and creases, Lisbon was clad in black robes along with a white wimple, which was what everyone of that place used as hood. It was a default nun outfit that often could be found anywhere in the world. Except the clothing of the Utopia’s nuns had the crest of a serpent being skewed by a large sword embroidered in the chest area.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Violet Evergarden. I am grateful for this favor. As soon as crossing the bridge becomes possible, I shall take my leave.”

Although Violet had not said the word ‘cold’ even once, her skin was clearly blue. Being considerate, Lisbon put more firewood into the fireplace.

“Thank you very much. May I dry my bag?”

There were probably very important things in it for her to prioritize it over her own clothes. When opening the bag, Violet took out a book wrapped in several cloths and handkerchiefs. Upon a closer look, it seemed to be a book-shaped accessory case. There were letters inside it. A sigh leaked from Violet’s lips.

“Are these important letters?” Lisbon asked, and Violet choppily spoke about her circumstances.

She was an Auto-Memories Doll, and had come to the island on request. The work had already been done. Along with writing the customer’s letter, she had also accepted to deliver it, and though all she had to do was meet with the postman to entrust the letter to him, she had been caught by the storm.

“So you are from a postal agency. Our Utopia is an ally of people, no matter who they are. Now, it is all right for you to dry your bag, but should you not warm up your body as well?”

As a white towel that had been prepared for her was placed over her head, Violet looked like a bride with a veil. Once she was given nun clothes as a replacement and finished changing into them, she was finally soothed into a state of being able to talk in detail.

Lisbon resumed the conversation simply, “Since we have become acquainted, let me talk about us as well. We of Utopia are an organization that reverences

every God whose name is cited in worldwide mythology.”

The vigor of the rain outside seemed to increase, and a thunder could be heard in the distance.

“The main purpose of Utopia’s activities is to further the diffusion and worshipping of worldwide mythology, and what we dedicate most of our strength to is the preservation of ‘demigods’. Miss Violet, do you know about demigods?”

Violet mutely shook her head.

For a second, as if cutting the room in half, a flash of lightning filled it with white brightness and soon disappeared. At the intensity of the noise, Lisbon wound up putting herself on guard a little, but the Auto-Memories Doll in front of her merely directed her eyes towards the window as if not seeing anything out of ordinary. As seen from the side, her orbs twinkled. Lisbon coughed, making her gaze return to where it was before.

“A demigod is a child born between deity and a human. In our scriptures, there’s a famous legend about a demigod. Love happened between a god and a person... look here.” Lisbon opened a huge, old and familiar book that had been left on the table. It seemed to be one with many religious paintings. Turning over countless pages, she stopped at half of its length. “Let’s read the first section... ‘The goddess of knowledge, Roses, descended from the Heavens to watch over the development of people’s civilization, and slipped onto the Earth in the form of a young human woman. She could not afford to let her identity ever be discovered. However, when Roses was changing from her human form to her goddess one in order to go back to the skies, she was seen by a traveler. The man swore not to reveal it to anyone, but asked to spend a night with Roses in return. Roses accepted that wish and returned to the Heavens at dawn, yet not even a year passed before she reappeared in front of the man. It was because their child, a demigod, had been born. Roses had a husband back in Heaven, and fearing his jealousy, she entrusted the child to the man. The demigod left behind inherited Roses’s rare intellectual power, but was murdered after earning the envy of people who drowned in self-conceit and carried pomp to the extreme. Earnestly, Roses simply awaited for her child to pass by the gates that led to both Heaven and the Underworld...’” Lisbon’s pale

finger showed the illustration on that page. “These heterochromatic eyes. One side is red, the other is golden... and long, lavender-grey hair, as if a single drop of purple had been poured onto silver. This is the remarkable appearance of the goddess of knowledge, Roses. She’s said to have taught words to humanity when it had just been born.”

“Is that the beginning of demigods?”

“It’s not just this. Worldwide mythology is true, and demigods are real as well. The greatest proof is the demigod of goddess Roses, Lady Lux, who lives in this Utopia.”

By her own experience, Lisbon was used to rebuff and sneers when saying such things, but Violet did neither.

“Why couldn’t Roses let humans know that she was a goddess?” she simply asked a genuine question that had come to her.

Lisbon smiled satisfactorily. “Good point. Since the past, gods and beings that possessed the gift of preeminence were glorified by people and their existences were feared, but at the same time, they were objects of reliability. Moreover, the power of being glorified attracts envy. That was the case of Roses’s child. Other than in this legend, she left behind several other children of men.” After saying that, Lisbon turned the pages again. “However, the eventual results of that were not positive... In reality, Roses was not supposed to let go of her children. Demigods are unique both in the Heavens and on Earth. However, in the world of humans, the power they inherit from the gods stands out. For their sake, it’s better for them to dwell in the Heavens. That is why, when we find a demigod, we hide and protect them from society. Until it comes the day of returning them to Heaven... This is off-topic, but Miss Violet, was your name taken from the flower goddess Violet?”

“Yes, it seems so.” Perhaps because she recalled memories of the parent who had named her, Violet averted her eyes.

“Still, as I thought... you really do keenly resemble the goddess of combat, Garnet Spear.” With a gentle scraping sound, Lisbon pushed the scripture in front of Violet and opened it.

Displayed there was a goddess in white armor holding a sword. With her

golden hair flowing free, she was staring into the distance. Her eyes were blue and stunning. She definitely was very similar to Violet.

“This illustration is a religious portrait made by a famous painter, and it is said to be his best masterpiece. Garnet Spear is loved by many sorts of artists, and her image was given numerous forms. Here in Utopia, there’s a room decorated with artworks of worldwide mythology gods; allow me to take you there tomorrow. I will tell you the anecdote of Garnet Spear later as well. Miss Violet. There are other things I want to tell and ask you about. That’s right, if you please, shall I give you a cameo of Garnet Spear as a sign of our closure?”

Standing up from her seat once, Lisbon pulled something out of the room’s chest and soon came back. “I believe it is suitable for you to have this. It’s a cameo brooch made of white agate by one of the Utopia’s nuns. This is a selling item exported to the continent to pay for the expenses of our activities.” Fitting in the palm of her hand was an oval-shaped object with the figure of the goddess sculpted on a white agate stone.

Grasping the emerald brooch attached to her robe, Violet said, “I... already have this.”

“Even if you don’t put it on, you can leave it at hand.”

“No. I do not wish to have any brooches besides this one.”

Her attitude could be considered stubborn. Lisbon retained her smile, but inwardly clicked her tongue.

—*No need to hurry. First, show affection, preach our teachings and let it sink in.*

Lisbon’s gaze had become not that of a nun who served the gods, but that of a hunter.

One day passed after that person appeared before my eyes during a thunderstorm. The rain continued intensely pouring outside, so going outdoors seemed very unlikely. After morning prayer had ended, as I was told that I was supposed to eat at the indoor garden instead of my imprisonment room, I had to think a bit about what to do. That was because I had exchanged conversations with other demigod candidates up until then.

—Just the usual scheme.

The demeanor of a demigod living in a utopia was something wanted from me.

“Lady Lux, this is Miss Violet, who works for a postal company. Because of this bad weather, she is relying on the Utopia.”

The one whom I had observed amidst those lightning bolts was far more fine-looking as seen in person at close range. Violet Evergarden. She had a quiet beauty that did not disappoint.

There was no fountain in the indoor garden, but the grass and flowers arranged in bowls were put close together so as to stage a small forest, creating a pure atmosphere. The place was often used for entertaining people who came from the outside world to the Utopia. It was open and cozy, making the Utopia naturally more comfortable.

“This is the demigod whom we are currently protecting in this Utopia, Lady Lux Sibyl. We found Lady Lux about seven years ago... When we heard rumors about her appearance and went to where she was, we saw that she was the splitting image of the goddess of knowledge, Roses, as you can tell. On top of that, Lady Lux was an orphan and did not know her origins... she did not know her father, either. Most likely, she fell to the Earth after being birthed by the goddess Roses for some reason. It’s unfortunate...”

“She really... has the same looks as the illustration.”

“You, too, are similar to Garnet Spear.” I replied, and Violet just nodded expressionlessly, seeming neither happy nor upset.

Both of us resembled gods.

“This is truly a wonderful thing, you two.”

The place was mostly a collection of fake plants. We had breakfast together on the seats set in the garden and had a harmless and inoffensive chitchat. I nonchalantly talked about how life in the Utopia was superb. Violet seemed not to be interested. Her attitude implied that she was more concerned about the sounds of the heavy rain outside.

I did not know much about the work of Auto-Memories Dolls, so I was surprised to hear that it consisted of women traveling alone around the world as amanuenses. They had to care for the letters of their clients above anything. I came to understand that as she always had her bag with her.

—*Incredible. I can't... do the same at all.*

I could not set a single foot out of the Utopia.

At first, I did not intend to take the conversation too far, but upon second thought, it had been a long time since I had last chatted with a woman close to my age, so the pace of the talk wound up accidentally quickening on my end.

“Miss Violet, what do you do on holidays?”

“I stay on standby. I wait for the next job.”

“You surely live in a big city, right? I admire those who are able to see various shops. You go outside often, so do you like staying home better after all?”

“I do not particularly like or dislike it. If I have a goal, I go outside.”

“Such as hanging out with a friend?”

It was strange. The more we talked, the more I wanted to know about her.

“I do not have friends.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

Her manner of speech was curt, but I contrastingly got a good feeling from it. Saying things honestly was always better than hiding lies and keeping up a caring façade.

“Hum, but I also don't have any, so it's okay.”

“Is this something that must be confirmed?”

“Eh?”

“You said that it was ‘okay’...”

“R-Right. It's weird to say that it's okay, isn't it?”

Pondering on whether I had spoiled the mood, I was feeling regretful, but

Violet denied that. "No. That is not it. I had been wondering if this was not actually the case. To tell the truth, my superior was also worried about it..." Violet nodded with a serious face, as if there was something she really had to think about.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, he said something similar to your question, Lady Lux. It seems it is 'normal' to have friends. I do not understand the concept of 'normal' very well... I am not troubled by not having any, and I do not know how to make one."

"Do you have meals with people from your workplace or stuff like that?"

"Sometimes, yes."

"How about starting from there? For instance, having a talk like this one..."

"Will we become friends if we talk?"

"I wonder..."

"This is very difficult."

"It is..."

"Yes, things that others... do naturally are very difficult for me."

"I totally understand."

Violet started slowly but surely asking me questions as well, about what I did during the day, if I could see colors the same way with both of my eyes even with them being heterochromatic, and what I did on holidays, just as I had asked her. I answered those only in the way I could.

"Lady Lux, do you not go outside?"

"No."

"So you are always here?"

"Yes, until now, and from now on."

"Is that the mission bestowed upon you, Lady Lux?"

"It might be better like this. After all, demigods are not supposed to descend to human lands."

“I was... told a little about the mythology. It is because you might become involved with unfortunate happenings.”

“Yes.”

“Lady Lux, were you unfortunate when you were outside?”

“I was poor and alone... it’s true that I needed protection.”

“This is not a land of humans but there are many humans here. Even so, is there anything preventing the effects of misfortune?”

The breathing of the people in the place – myself and the nuns serving us – halted seamlessly. Her way of inquiring did not seem to be that of someone who was digging for some sort of information.

“I... wonder.”

“You do not know?” A simple question. An innocent line of thought.

“No, that... that... Miss Violet. Why... do you... ask?”

Sometimes, things like that were the beginning of a turmoil that would cast discord over peaceful moments.

“No, I apologize if it is something challenging to answer. I was merely thinking that you did not have to force yourself to stay here if you were ill-fated here as well.”

It was a situation that I, who only spent my days thinking about when scary times would be over, just as I was waiting for that storm to end, could not cope with.

“Am... I... forcing... myself?” while speaking, I could not help but be curious about the stare of the nun by my side. I could feel a pressure from her gaze that threateningly seemed to order me to “not say anything unnecessary”.

“I was told you could not leave here for the rest of your life. But you talked about your admiration for cities...”

“That’s right... I indeed said that. However... in any case, it’s impossible.”

“What is?”

“I cannot leave this place.”

“Why?”

“It’s not allowed. Since I’m a demigod...”

“Not allowed by whom?”

“Eh?”

“Who does not allow it?”

“That’s...”

—*Aah, no good.*

“Lady Lux is a worshipped demigod. Is there anyone above you here?”

—*Don’t expose it.*

“The fact that I can’t go out even though I want to is... because...”

—*Don’t say any more than that.*

“Because...”

The sound of palms clapping ensued. I looked at the nun in fear. Having forcefully stopped our conversation, she had a cheerful smile on.

“Lady Lux, Miss Violet, it has become cold here. Shall we move to somewhere else?”

As the talk was interrupted, Violet’s lips suggested she had something to say, but she silently complied. It was because I was begging with my eyes. She was gradually realizing that place’s ambiguity.

—*Hurry and escape.* Once the nun turned around, I said so without voicing it. I wondered if she understood. I hoped so. If it was now, she could still make it.

Yes, I was confined in that place.

I proposed to the nun, “Sister, can’t we show her the premises...? Like, the room with the images of the gods, and other things. She must be bored only waiting for the weather to clear up.”

“That... is not open to the public.”

“Still, I want to show it to her. I want to see it as well. See, since I don’t have

much time..."

The nun's mouth seemed to be about to muster rejection, yet she wound up giving permission, "That's right. You will only stay on Earth for a little while longer. Surely, there are other nuns who wish to see Lady Lux. Miss Violet was summoned to see Lisbon after we are done, so she will have to take her leave halfway, but until then..."

I knew that nun had a soft side to her. She had always taken care of me ever since I had been brought there. She probably had a bit of affection towards me. I was grateful for that, but at the same time, extremely afraid of it.

"When I think about how the time we have to talk like this is coming to an end, I feel very lonely."

Afraid of how much all the people there valued me.

"Well, then, shall I show you around without further ado?"

Led by the nun, the four of us went around the Utopia. Its management mostly consisted of support from an investor whom we called the 'owner'. I never met them, but they were clearly filthy rich.

All kinds of religious paintings and busts of gods adorned the corridors. We had an indoor church where luxuriously colorful stained glass shone overhead, a library crammed with old and new books, and a large public bath made of marble.

The amount of working nuns was not only a dozen. Just everyone being able to eat every day already cost money. Given the maintenance cost of the building, our budget likely escalated.

"Here is the last stop. We invited an artisan to make these. It's the room of the gods' sculptures."

A serene world awaited beyond the heavy door that was opened. I had only visited it in a few occasions, but no matter how many times I looked at it, I had a feeling of heaviness. A variety of statues were placed disorderly in the room, and water murmurings could be heard as a number of small waterways ran through the ground. Glittering glass beads spread beautifully inside them. From the ceiling, plants called 'dark vines', which were said to grow well even where

the sunlight did not hit, extended their branches around the walls and the ground, creating a fantastic atmosphere.

“My, so the preparations have been completed? Lady Lux, I will excuse myself for a little bit.” The nun beckoned another member of the Utopia’s personnel from the entrance in-between the statues of the gods and left our side.

—*Now’s the time.* I thought as I grasped Violet’s arm and pulled it.

“Lady Lux, hum... what were you trying to say earlier?”

“This way. I will show you Garnet Spear’s sculpture.” While saying so, I had a different objective. As we walked towards the statue of Garnet Spear fighting against a giant snake, I asked, “Miss Violet, have the Utopia’s Sisters asked you anything?”

Her line of sight shifted from me to the statue as she answered, “Yes, I was questioned about my origins... and upbringing. I have been told to not talk much about myself, so I did not say anything other than that I was an orphan... and an ex-soldier.”

I frowned. What a situation. That gorgeous girl who resembled Garnet Spear did not have parents. She was the exact kind of ‘demigod’ that the Utopia sought.

“Miss Violet. Listen well. The Sisters say this Utopia’s goal is to protect and venerate demigods, but that is wrong. It’s true... that I was saved from being raised in an orphanage and from poverty after being taken in by them... but at the same time, my life is being targeted.”

Perhaps because my tone was hard to hear, Violet finally peeled her eyes off the sculpture. “What do you mean? Please tell me about this in detail.”

That was when I heard the nun calling for us. Hiding in-between the statues, I resumed the discussion, “The Utopia’s objective is the safeguarding of demigods. But the main goal is returning them to the Heavens, where the gods reside. Most demigod legends end with them being destroyed in the land of men because of their powers. The Utopia resents this and attempts to guide them to the Heavens... but the method for that is murder. This is a facility of a homicidal group in which people tainted with a twisted form of thinking

gather."

Violet blinked piercingly. "In summary, Lady Lux is fated to be killed?"

"It's been decided that I will be returned to Heaven on the morning of the next day of full moon, three days from now. It will be my birthday. The demigods kept here are raised waiting for the day they become fourteen years old. In general, it is said in the continent that fourteen-year-olds are adults, so the Utopia's ideal is that our childhood should be lived in the human world, and our adulthood in the Heavens. However, if a demigod who is older than fourteen is taken in, they are killed within no more than ten days. Up until now, I have seen several adult demigod candidates, who either were brought here, lost or visiting, be slaughtered by them. You are in danger too. The Utopia is targeting you as a demigod as well."

"Me...?"

"I told you that the Utopia was a group of people with twisted thinking, didn't I? To tell the truth, we don't need to have some sort of amazing power; just having the looks is enough. I myself am not that intelligent. I don't know why I was born with an appearance like this, but I've heard that there is an ethnic group with the same hair and eyes in a country far from here. I'm sure that's my ancestry. Also, one more thing that is essential to decide if someone is a demigod is if they either are orphans or don't have one parent. It's because that makes it easy to pretend they're from the demigod legends. On top of that, Miss Violet, not only do you resemble Garnet Spear, but you are also a former soldier. From the Utopia's viewpoint, this is like saying 'please kill me'." I went on hastily, as though to stir up the sense of dread.

Still, perhaps not having any fear at all towards the Utopia's truth, Violet dispassionately interjected, "Is that so?"

"Miss Violet, don't 'is that so' me and just run away. You said Sister Lisbon had called you, right? You must not go. They will most certainly give you some medicine to restrain your body."

"How would they kill me?" she carefreely asked about the method of her own murder.

"You'd be put on a small boat that would sail along the course of Chevalier's

biggest waterfall and drop down from it. Right now, there are plenty of openings for you to escape. Please run away.” As if appealing, I shook her arms. A mechanical creak resounded from them.

She was a person with automated parts and as charming as a doll. I really could think of someone like her as a demigod. For an instant, I was almost similar to the people of Utopia for having that sort of reasoning, and became afraid of myself.

As I slowly let go of Violet’s arms, she firmly held my hands. “Thank you for your kindness. I will do as you warned and leave this place as soon as possible. Lady Lux, allow me to assist you with your own escape as well.”

Did she really understand what sort of circumstances she was currently in? I could not read her as she was expressionless, but at any rate, she seemed willing to flee. As I was relieved, I could not assent with my head to the help she had offered me.

“Lady Lux?”

I stopped moving halfway to a smile. I was unable to properly muster my voice out of my throat. My blood pressure rapidly lowered and the muscles of my back went cold. That was a creeping sensation of alarm one would feel when committing an enormous failure. It began to take over my body. What was I so scared of? Being saved by someone was a dream I had had for many years.

—*What’s wrong with me?*

Even so, I was unable to grab onto the hand stretched towards me.

—*I have to say it. I have to say, “please do that”.*

If I stayed there, I would die a painful underwater death within three days. That was a definite truth. The nuns that treated me so gently now, too, would forget about me once I was gone and find a new demigod to worship. After all, theirs was a false affection. In reality, I was not loved by anyone. I was not cherished by anyone. There was nothing good in that place. I could not trust anybody. Everything was scary. Still...

“Lady Lux, do you not wish to leave here?”

—*I... I... just realized that I'm scared of venturing into the outside world.*

“That... that's not it...”

No, I had actually realized it a long time before.

“Do you not wish to run away?”

I knew. I knew.

“Are people... supposed to fear death?”

That was it. I did not want to die. But...

“I don't want to... die.”

...but to me, living was as frightening as dying. Yes, frightening.

Ever since I had been brought there from the orphanage when I was seven years old, I was always a caged bird. I received education, but I only knew what was in the scriptures. I also could not craft like the nuns. If I went into the outside world just like that, how was I supposed to live? Other girls my age surely knew all kinds of things, and had family, friends and a place to belong. Yet I had nothing. I was no more than a cowardly child continuously immersed in despair within the darkness I was confined, who had been watching other people die without being able to intervene. No, I could not even be considered a child anymore. I was nothing. Once someone as useless as me stepped outside, what should I do? Was it not clear that I would die a dog's death? If that was the case, then the invitation of demise given to me by that forced fate...

—*...would be much better.* As I thought so, my voice did not come out.

“Lady Lux!” Upon being called stridently, my body shook in surprise.

The nun was observing us from the side of Garnet Spear's statue. It might be that she had heard our exchange. No, she definitely had. Actual rage and scorn were now seeping out of her usually placid face.

I swiftly pushed the nun away. “Run!”

As I shouted, Violet reached her arm out to me again. “Lady Lux, your hand.”

Her figure was just like that of a knight. I had always, always imagined such a

scene. A handsome, noble prince – someone that magnificent would come to save me from the Utopia of hopelessness.

Nevertheless, while suppressing the nun, I shook my head. “Please go! I... I cannot live in the outside world! Please! Hurry and go!”

Violet attempted to hold onto me and take me by force, but I shook her off.

—*I really... can't.*

I chose death in the last minute.

—*I'm scared. Living is... scarier.*

I was stupid. It was a stupid choice. However, being alive was especially arduous for me.

—*I have always been shallowly breathing right beside death.*

That environment had already allowed me to cogitate dying, and I had grown used to it. All I could think about was that I could hardly wait for the day to come.

—*Living is... scarier.*

It was much harsher to live in the world of humans, being used, lied to, and accumulating sad memories.

“I will die here! That’s what I want to do! I can’t live... in the outside world at this point! I’ll die like this... in this place... so go!”

It could be that I had become insane. While I had said that the people of Utopia were crazy, it might be that the craziest and most broken one was myself.

After standing on the spot for a few seconds, Violet turned her back to me. And then, suddenly, she destroyed the stained glass window between the statues with one arm. She certainly planned to escape from there. Rain and wind, along with a large amount of leaves and flowers that had been ripped off the trees burst in.

“Don’t run away! You’re a demigod! Under our control...!” the nun yelled.

Now I was the one being pushed. But even so, I did not lose to her. I grabbed

her foot with one hand and clung to it. “Run!” I desperately endured being kicked.

Violet stood by the window frame, strongly holding her bag to her side. The height from there to the ground was one that could ensure an escape if one did not fail in landing.

—Now, go!

I thought she would surely not turn back. However, her neck snapped towards my direction, and she offered her hand once more. “Lady Lux.” It was as if her eyes said “come, let’s escape this place together”.

If I took that hand, maybe I could have a future.

—Aah, this storm, her, death, everything.

I was sorry for the person with those strong eyes that made me think of these things.

—They’re all mixing up in my head and are too noisy; I don’t want them.

Since I was tired of even so much as thinking.

“Go.” I whispered that single word.

“If you ever need help, call my name.” Saying nothing but that, she jumped out of the window.

The nun let out a sharp scream. After being cussed by her as she got up, I was hit on the cheek and fell on the spot. Looking at her distorted face, I scoffed.

—See, the world really is terrifying.

That was why dying was easier.

The morning after the downpour had stopped was beautiful. Trees and grass covered in dew left a characteristic after-rain odor. The Sun enclosed the world with a light unlike that of the sunset. That very morning Sun caused the continuous drizzle to sparkle. The birthday and funeral of a girl, who was worshiped by a certain religious organization of a certain isolated island, was greeted with such a fine day.

“Lady Lux, please go soundly.”

With a gun pointed at her, Lux had her wrists tied and was put on a small boat filled with flowers. The “soundly” that Lisbon had said was not directed at the one who was about to die. Lux’s face had clear evidence that she had received beating. Her mouth was swollen purple, the corner of her eye injured. Perhaps because she had not been granted any rest, her head staggered and her vision was out of focus.

As Lux remained silent even with such an exhausted face, Lisbon laughed. “Lady Lux, you were the most easily manageable and submissive demigod I’ve ever seen. We have not forgiven you for helping that Auto-Memories Doll escape, but... we will stop blaming you, as you are about to go on a journey to the Heavens. Any last words?”

Lux looked up at Lisbon blankly. That world had such a stunning scenery, so how come the people living in it were so ugly? As if sensing Lux’s feelings, a distorted smile appeared on Lisbon’s lips.

“How long will you continue doing this?”

“Always. For... ever.”

“What’s the meaning of it?”

“You are asking that now?” Lisbon snorted as if making fun of her. “We wish to protect this world, which the gods have created. You’ve listened to the legends of demigods several times, right? They are disparate both in Heavens and on Earth. You are disparate. An existence like that is... strange. It’s strange, right?”

Even while being questioned, Lux could not respond to being labeled with the word “strange”.

“Your existence itself is strange. What’s with those eyes and hair? They’re not ‘normal’. If disparate ones are not disposed of, they might cause trouble.”

“I haven’t... done... anything.”

“Even if you haven’t done anything yet, you eventually might. Your existence is a bother. To put it simply, we are... afraid of those like you. That is why we worship, respect and kill you.”

They could not stand those who were not like them, who were not similar to them.

Lux finally understood the reason why the people of that organization assembled. Self-love that had gone too far. Not identifying with another person made them uneasy. Therefore, they would kill them. It was a perverse belief, but for them, that was overlooked as 'normal'.

—*And the craziest one here is me, for thinking that being killed by these people was best.*

The gun was aimed at the circlet on Lux's head.

"You were actually supposed to die by drowning, but the Sister who used to take care of you begged for mercy. We shall let you die with a gunshot. Because dying suffocated... is terrible. Then, farewell, Lady Lux. We deliver this to you in your last moments: the chorus number 320." Lisbon gave a signal behind her back.

As she did so, the other nuns, who were lined up and had been watching the two of them, begun to sing a requiem. Even though they were attempting a collective murder, their singing voices were beautiful.

"Our Gods in Heaven..."

She would be killed once the song was over.

In order to dilute her fear of death, Lux muttered the words that she had been made to memorize over and over from the scriptures, "I am your child, I am you flesh and blood, I am your tears..."

The sound of the water echoing from under the boat was the sound of the tomb that she would soon flow into.

"Have pity, have pity, have pity on me." The roots of her teeth trembled unevenly. "Pity me, God." Hers was a crying voice. Lux steadily shed tears at the fear of her unstoppable journey towards death.

Although she had chosen death, the fact that it was frightening to welcome it did not change. Although living was scarier, the agony awaiting her was unbearable.

“God... God... Lady Roses...”

Lux’s body would probably be carried by the river and drop from the great waterfall. Her corpse would float along with the flowers, fall into the basin and be swallowed by it. Her whole being would be invaded by water and sink. Just by imagining it, she felt like fainting. Rather, it would be wonderful if she could faint now.

“God... Lady Roses... Lady Roses...” Lux repeatedly called for the name of the goddess that was said to be her mother. “Lady Roses... Lady Roses...” Many times, instead of reciting spells to eliminate her fear. “Lady Roses... Lady Roses... Lady Roses...”

—*Mom, you gave birth to and abandoned me only to act like you have anything to do with it afterwards?*

“Lady Roses...”

—*What even was my life?*

“Lady... Roses... ugh... uh, ah, ugh...”

—*When I was little, even though I was poor, even though I was an orphan, I wouldn’t have chosen death by my own will. Why did things turn out like this?*

“Lady... Roses... uuh...” She called for her even while hiccupping. “Uuh... uh... Rose...” That was how she was spending her last moments. “Uah—aaah... uuugh...” With her mouth still open. “Vi...” With the will of someone who still earned for air. “Vi... o...” She called for her god of salvation, who set apart her fears. “Vi... o... let...!” Lux shouted naturally.

“*If you ever need help, call my name.*”

The name of the only person who had ever truly attempted to save her in her life.

“Violet! Violet, Violet! Help me! I don’t want to die!”

Was that wish a trigger for something? A scream rose during the requiem. Lisbon suddenly fell down. Lux’s eyes could see someone strike Lisbon from behind. As she was hit on the head, Lisbon wound up letting go of the cords that kept the small boat in place, and so it begun to be carried by the current.

Yet the cords were immediately held back and the boat stopped.

“Eh?”

The nun who had committed such misconduct stood flat-faced.

“Eh, eh?”

Holding onto the cords of the boat, the nun stretched her arms towards Lux to forcibly pull her back to land. She pushed Lux behind her back protectively, and the small boat was carried by the stream as if it were nobody’s business.

Everyone was stunned. Their mouths were agape to a ludicrous extent.

“I have been...”

For the one who had destroyed the ritual to appear from that place’s interior was something unconceivable. It was impossible.

“...waiting for you...”

Yet she who had done so...

“...to call my name, Lady Lux.”

...exposed her face as she took off her white wimple.

“Vi... olet!”

It was the only person who had risked herself to truly help Lux in her life. She was an odd Auto-Memories Doll.

Before anyone realized it, Violet was holding the gun that had been in Lisbon’s hands. With no mercy, she shot at the nuns’ feet. Earth flew up as if exploding.

“Open the path. If anyone intends to interfere, I warn that you will not come out of this with only a bruise.”

Without moving from the spot, the nuns looked at each other.

“Fight back, my fellows who serve the gods!” Lying on the ground and enduring the pain, Lisbon yelled.

The nuns gathered together and responded to her brave call. They all took knives and pistols from within their robes and headed towards the two.

"Forgive me, but I will have to treat you a little roughly." Violet took Lux into her arms. With the possible difficulty of handling her, Violet put Lux under her arm and broke into run.

The nuns came in their direction as though to clash with them. With the impulse she earned from the run, Violet leaped and kicked several of them as if toppling domino pieces.

Being treated as luggage, Lux let out an offbeat scream. Violet thrust her to the end of the path she had opened, turning again towards the enemies. With a broad swing, she threw the gun that had run out of ammo at an opponent who held Lux at gunpoint, hitting her on the face and causing her to pass out. She then dashed upwards by kicking the stomach of someone who rushed towards her with a knife, performing a somersault. Stealing two guns from a fallen foe, and while shooting with both, she took control of the surroundings. In spite of the overwhelming disadvantage of one person versus many, Violet had the upper hand in that unfolding battlefield.

Shuddering, Lux shrank back. Violet, who noticed an enemy attempting to attack Lux again, immediately jumped. Coiling her body around the nun like a snake, she tangled her legs around the other's neck and applied weight to them, turning her over. She then downed her fist onto the nun's face.

—*She's... overwhelming.*

Lux's eyes were glued to the way she fought.

Violet declared uncharacteristically loudly to the fallen nuns staring at her, "My arms are prosthetics of Estark Inc. They can easily crush your bodies. Those who are ready for it, please do step forth." Her courageous figure as she opened one hand before her chest, then balled a fist with her palm letting out a screech, was the one of a beautiful fighter.

The nuns ogled her frame as if seeing the goddess of combat, Garnet Spear, whom they had revered no small amount of times.

As she was able to get up somehow despite her bleeding head, Lisbon shouted, "What are you doing? Seize her! You can return her to the Heavens right here... I will allow it. We cannot let such a monster loose on this land."

“Are demigods monsters?”

She promptly answered Violet’s question, “That’s right. Monsters like you... aren’t supposed to be on Earth. Halves who are neither people nor gods... your powers will surely bring us tragedy! You... you are a great example! Where did you... learn to fight like this?! Just how many people have you killed...? The likes of you were not supposed to be born. You heretics!” Lisbon’s eyes were bloodshot, and saliva bubbled from her lips, which used to form a gentle smile.

There were nuns with shocked expressions at her utterances, but the ones who agreed with and nodded at her strongly gripped their weapons again.

Violet simply retorted Lisbon’s curses, “I see. I might really be a demigod, by the looks of it. If that is the case, I can confirm many of these things.” With her tone that had a sweet ring to it becoming icy, she continued, “Indeed, there might be no helping it if an imitation of human being such as myself were killed with the pretense of being returned to Heaven. But Lady Lux is different. She is... merely a girl who went through frightening experiences.” There was no hesitation in her actions or words. “You might be satisfied if I said ‘please take me’. However, I am now a domesticated monster. I cannot afford to be killed so easily. I am forbidden to fight unnecessary battles, but... my Lord once told me” she removed her black gloves, displaying her artificial arms, “to ‘live’.” Violet instantly rushed towards Lisbon, this time throwing a punch at her stomach.

Lisbon flew a long distance. Her body fell into the river and the other nuns went for her aid in an extreme hurry, as it seemed she would be carried away by the current.

Just a swing from one of her fists was enough to send someone soaring through the air like a doll. Upon witnessing that fact, those who had taken back their weapons let go of them at once.

“Challengers, come forward. I, Violet Evergarden, shall take you on.” The beautiful woman standing calmly amidst of so much violence was lurid and bewitching.

In the end, no one attempted to go against her after that, and so, Lux and Violet walked their way out of the place.

“That was scary... that was scary...”

“You were scared? But now, you are safe.”

Somewhere away from the river, as Lux’s restraints were removed, she burst into tears. The horror she had gone through just a little while before suddenly reoccurred to her.

Halfway crossing the woods that went in the direction of the island’s harbor on Violet’s lead, they stopped to take Violet’s precious bag, which had been very carefully suspended on a tree branch. Did she have confidence that they would be able to come so far, Lux asked herself while crying.

“Hadn’t you run away?”

“In the end, the rain did not stop, so I was camping in a cave I had found. I was... thinking all the while in there... about what Lady Lux had said.”

“Me...?”

“That you... could not live in the outside world.”

She had indeed said so.

“I will die here! That’s what I want to do! I can’t live... in the outside world at this point! I’ll die like this... in this place... so go!”

It had been one truth from the peak of her limits.

“Although I am a little different, I, too... had always been living in only one world. I was used by a certain person and did not know any other way of life besides it. That world had its circumstances, and we were set apart... so I became separated from my Lord. Even though a kind person attempted to teach me a new lifestyle, at first, I resisted it. If I ceased to be myself... no, if I ceased to be an ‘asset’, I thought that the person who had needed me until then would no longer want me.”

The two girls walked. The path ahead was testing. It was coated in mud, damp with grass condensation, and all they could count on were their own feet. However, they went on without ever turning back.

“I believed that Lady Lux was the same as me. That if you chose a new path, you would be troubled as to what you should do at that point, in that different

trajectory...? Perhaps you were thinking, 'Am I wanted in that place? If I am not, it is not worth anything'. Or 'If I am not wanted there, I must be an unnecessary existence'. That is... extremely..." She was probably at loss on what term to use. Her pronunciation was that of someone who was borrowing the words of another, "It is extremely... 'scary'."

It was incredibly strange for that young woman to be scared of something, Lux thought.

—*I mean, she's so strong and pretty. She seems... invincible.*

Yet she was the same as Lux herself. She was slightly afraid of living.

"But, Miss Violet, you did not stop, right?"

She was afraid, but had chosen to live.

"Yes, I was ordered to live, and... I felt I had many things to reflect on. There was truly so much I did not know. The many words that person had taught me... and said to me, such as 'I lo'..." she trailed off. Violet grabbed the emerald brooch on her chest to ease her hammering heartbeats. "I started to think... that I... wanted to learn about and understand the words I had been told, of a feeling that is foreign to me. So, Lady Lux, your way of thinking might change. You can... die anytime. When the time you wish to do so comes, no one can stop you. That is why, I was wondering if it was not all right... for you to know a little more about the outside world until then... and so I meddled. I apologize. I will take the responsibility. We can still cross over in this condition. Lady Lux, if you do not have a destination, please just come with me. I will not do anything harmful." Violet stretched her hand out to Lux, who walked a few steps behind her.

This time, Lux did not hesitate. The mechanical arm was cold and hard, but for some reason, it felt warm to her.

Violet's robes were covered in dirt and her hair was disheveled. There was nothing in her that made her seem like she was wearing a knight in shiny armor, but to Lux, her figure overlapped with Garnet Spear's.

"I am forever indebted to you for rushing to my aid."

As Lux spoke with a runny nose, Violet asked back, "What are you saying?

Lady Lux, were you not the one who saved me first? I am grateful to you for having courage and warning me."

As Lux was both shocked and happy to have someone's gratitude despite being how she was, she cried once again.

--I guess will... live a little more after all.

She immediately fixed her way of thinking right then.

What happened afterwards was that I was taken by Violet to her workplace, the CH Postal Service, and started living there. At first, I was only in charge of phone calls, but within a year, I simultaneously became the president's personal secretary, leading a restless everyday life.

President Hodgins was someone I could respect, for he kindly – and sometimes strictly – took care of a girl like me, of unknown background and who had come from an obscure religious organization. However, I came to understand that he was a person with a quirk or two.

The only things that changed in me ever since I arrived there were that I got a haircut and replaced my circlet for a berretta. And I became a little closer to Violet, to the point we became able to talk to each other without honorifics.

She continued on rushing about as a stardom of Auto-Memories Dolls. Her appearance did not change much. Maybe all that was different was the frilly umbrella added to her standard outfit?

Being able to meet with the much-requested Violet was quite difficult, but she returned regularly to the office, and during those times, I would invite her for tea. Seated at the terrace of a nearby café facing the city's main street, we would report our recent situations to one another while observing the traffic. My stories were mostly about our unprecedented boss, but Violet would talk about the various countries she had dragged her feet around and the people she had met in them. The feelings of a writer who lived surrounded by beautiful mountains towards his beloved daughter. The letters to the future from a mother who lived in an old-fashioned household on a slightly elevated hill. The sad last moments of a youth who was returned to his hometown in the countryside. The passionate determination of a young astronomer whom she

had met in a city of starry skies.

Swinging from joy to sorrow at her narrations, I would sometimes cry, sometimes laugh. We surely looked like just two female friends when chatting so peacefully. No one should be able to tell that we were the former live sacrifice of a religious organization and an ex-soldier.

It was not as if I had forgotten my past, but I had no intention of continuing to engage in it. After all, the me who was a demigod of Roses had died back then, and the current me was an employee of a postal company.

Those who die do not come back. Physical bodies, time and values can never be retrieved. My feelings of embracing the thirst for death remained firmly rooted within me, but they had fallen to the bottom of a deep, deep sleep. “Don’t wake up yet”, I would tell them every morning.

There were days when I would think that living really was hard, but during those times, I would close my eyes and strongly reminisce to that instant in which my minimum and maximum intermingled. That I was going to perish in a small boat meant as a coffin, decorated with flowers. That I had cried in it about how I did not want to die. That someone had saved me. That her artificial arm had reached out to me.

Violet Evergarden, the friend that I was proud of having.

Chapter 11: The Flying Letters and the Auto-Memories Doll (Part 1)

The Auto-Memories Dolls' holiday was ending peacefully.

How to spend the end of summer was mostly commonplace – watching the trees outside by the windowsill during the morning, taking strolls with an umbrella around the neighborhood at noon, reading books under the shade of trees at evening, and preparing for the next journey at night. When no one was looking, she would dismantle and reconstruct guns, as well as throw knives at leaves falling from trees in order not to let her arms become lax. But essentially, she was enveloped in serenity. That was the result of her adoptive mother's influence in treating her like a child.

There were not many who would purposefully attempt to break her silence in the first place. After all, she was someone who instilled the feeling of nervousness in others. She had a reticent and cold beauty. She could cause time and the people in her surroundings to naturally stop.

"Violet. You... are coming with me."

She was not someone suitable to invite to play.

Located in a narrow street away from the main avenue of Leidenschaftlich's capitol city, Leiden, a lone building protruded, reigning amongst several small shops lined up together. The CH Postal Service was a fairly new company that had just entered the mail industry. A spire with a light green dome-shaped roof and a weather-bird on top could be considered the mark of said postal company. Surrounding the spire was a dark green roof, and the outer walls were made of red bricks that had been sunburned into a tasteful hue. On the arch-shaped entryway, where the agency's name was printed onto a steel plate in golden letters, there was a bell that produced a merry sound whenever the doors were opened, so as to announce the arrival of customers. Inside the

building, a counter could be seen right upon entry, which was specifically the reception desk of delivery items.

There were three floors; the first one was the postal reception, the second was the office and the spire of the third floor was the president's residence. Currently, on the second floor, the employees of the office were challenging themselves while working desperately.

There was a date called the "closing day" in the company. During it, all transactions, reports related to them, invoices, proofs of payment and everything else involving the operation of the company were neatly cleared up for the month. For the clerks, it was a day of painful battling, as the closing work was added to their regular work.

"You said we'd go together, and that you'd take me there..." Amidst the scene of arduous fighting stood a young woman, directing a reproachful and depressed gaze at Hodgins. She tightly held onto the hem of her clothes and bit her lip as if to assert, "I am pissed".

She was a beautiful woman with long dark hair and full of mature appeal. She wore an open bustier, which displayed her rich chest without any reserve whatsoever and was connected to her shoulder-to-elbow charcoal gray inner garment. She also had on a beads choker, a pendant, bangles, hand chain bracelets and rings made of precious metals. Her leather hot-pants were dyed blue and had golden cross-stitches. Her embroidery thread garter belt consisted of geometrical patterns and decorated only the bare skin from the middle of her tights to her knee-high boots. She was a person whose everything, from her outfit to her glossy beauty, was poison to the eyes. However...

"No way, no way! If you're not taking me, I don't want to go."

...her actions were that of a child. She was stomping her feet.

"No, I mean, even if you say that, Cattleya..." Claudia Hodgins, the president of the CH Postal Service, smiled stiffly at her posture. "Look at this mountain of paperwork. It feels like it's gonna hit me."

On Hodgins's desk lay a pile of forms bearing a menace that really did seem as if they were about to deal him a blow. He was applying stamps to them while speaking. His examination and approval were definite requirements for the

various documents made by clerks. Perhaps because he blindly trusted the clerks, or because he lacked the will to read, he was simply pushing the papers over without confirming their contents.

“President Hodgins, give the documentation to me once you are done with it. Please take a look at these too.”

The conversation was interrupted. A stack of paperwork was added to the pile.

“Ah, sorry, Little Lux. Did you confirm them all?”

The one who had come in-between Cattleya and Hodgins was a girl with an innocent face. She had lavender-gray hair trimmed slickly above her shoulders. Although she wore glasses, upon a closer look, one would be able to see that the color of her eyes was different on each side. It was a conservative stereotype, but the scarf around her neck and gold berretta attached to the side of her head were subtle traits of a professional lady.

“I did. The ones that were revised are tagged. Please check them.”

Lux Sibyl, the girl who used to be worshipped as a demigod by a religious group in an isolated island, was now working uprightly at the CH Postal Service.

“Thank you. My secretary is the best. Even as an understatement, I love you.”

Lux replied with a hopeless expression to the lady-killer wink shot at her, “Enough of flattery, just please get your... get your arm moving. If only I had stopped you that time... Going on a trip with a stage actress, of all things... It was so obvious that you’d soon break up anyways... That time... if only I...”

“How cruel. You just hurt my heartbroken self even more, Little Lux...”

“If only I had made you do your work even if I had to tie you down, this wouldn’t have...”

Since his secretary was acting as though she had become involved in some incident and was inconsolable, Hodgins regained his seriousness. “I’m sorry. I’ll buy a stamping machine.”

Lux then spoke to Cattleya as if imploring, “And Cattleya. Please... don’t try to do anything to stop President Hodgins. Everyone’s clocking-out depends on

President Hodgins's progress. I want to leave as soon as possible today..."

The clerks that were silently doing their jobs nodded in unison at Lux's words. For them, the time they would be set free from the office on that day was an extreme matter of life and death. Cattleya had been pretending not to notice it, but a concentrated pressure from withering occasional stares and voice tones pierced her back with an unsaid "those who intend to meddle should leave".

"What's with that...? Getting so stuck-up just because you're the secretary. President's secretary... how unfair. I wanna be a secretary too."

"Cattleya, you're an Auto-Memories Doll, right? Isn't that better? 'Getting stuck-up', you say... I was just stating that though you may be on your day off, we are in the middle of work."

Despite having a young appearance, on the inside, Lux had grown into a completely capable secretary. After having fled from the religious organization, she did her best to repay Hodgins and the company that had taken her in.

"President, leave the snacks for when you're done with the documents."

Hodgins's hand, which had been attempting to take something from his desk's drawer, retracted.

"What's with that? What's with that? What's with that?! Days off aren't defined for Auto-Memories Dolls, so there's no helping it, right?"

Cattleya was willing to continue the quarrel, but before she realized it, Lux was answering the phone. The look in the latter's eyes said "sorry about that".

"I get it."

It was obvious at first glance that everyone in the company was busy. She was also aware that she was disturbing them.

Nevertheless, not aiming to give up, the Auto-Memories Doll Cattleya showed a printed pamphlet to Hodgins, who had turned into the aforementioned stamping machine. "But it's only once a year... that we can take part in the 'Flying Letters'. I... I already wrote a letter, and I didn't invite anyone else because President had said he would be taking me. I don't want to go by myself. Attending a festival alone... isn't that like a punishment?"

The words “Seventh Aeronautical Exhibition” were written in the pamphlet. Said exhibition would be held in the maneuvering area of the Leidenschaftlich army’s Air Force. It seemed to consist of aerial maneuver demonstrations and public displays of the army and the navy’s planes, as well as private ones gathered by volunteers. The “Flying Letters” that Cattleya had talked about was one of the programs. So-called “letters of encouragement to whomever picks them”, collected from civilians, would be scattered from the sky by elite pilots chosen from the army and navy. It was a romantic event, in which the participants were stimulated to send inspirational messages to the strangers that would pick their letters, as well as to themselves. It was the only festival on the continent in which letters fell from the sky. As the description stated that the sixth exhibition had happened several years before, it seemed the festival had been canceled for some time due to intensified wars.

She brought the pamphlet closer as if to make Hodgins kiss it, causing him to sneeze.

“See, I want to go too, Cattleya. But I had forgotten that today was the closing day...”

Cattleya’s eyebrows withdrew. Her amethyst orbs swerved with sadness. Her attitude was similar to a dog cub crying dejectedly.

A feeling of guilt grew within Hodgins. “Don’t make such a face, my cute lady. The festival involved in the exhibition will go on until nighttime, so I can join on the way. I mean, I also want to let my employees clock out early and go to the festival. But we won’t make it in time for the Flying Letters... I think. Well, I don’t know, but yeah, most likely.”

“I will... be alone until then?”

“Benedict... is... in the middle of deliveries, after all.”

“Never mind him. Why are you mentioning his name?” Her face going red, Cattleya attempted to overturn Hodgins’s desk. It was a strength that could never be imagined to come from those slender arms.

Hodgins hastily held back the desk. “Calm down, Cattleya. I get it. The only other available person close to your age is... Little Lux. Show me the business schedule of the employees.”

Although she was in the middle of a phone call, Lux handed Hodgins a notebook while talking cheerfully. The operational plans of the employees were registered in it.

Hodgins grinned. It was because he had found someone who seemed to be in a convenient condition. "Aah, Little Violet is off-duty."

"Eh?" A slight rejection could be noted in Cattleya's voice.

The mansion was located beyond a path of trees. Ruling among flowerbeds of extravagant colors with plants of several varieties in a luxurious and carefully tended lawn, as well as a farm growing seasonal vegetables, was the Evergarden residence, of which Patrick Evergarden was the current head. It was closer to being a castle than a manor. It had chalky white walls and an ultramarine roof. Its architecture was elegant and well-balanced, wholly symmetrical on both sides, from the spires to the windows.

As a gardener sighted Cattleya's figure while she passed by, he shouted, "Miss Cattleya Baudelaire, right?"

Due to Hodgins having talked to them in advance, the gardener had accompanied her from the gates to the mansion, and once she arrived at the porch, a butler welcomed her.

"She will be here soon."

As she waited with nothing to do in an anteroom, before long, Violet Evergarden appeared, just as the butler had said. "Cattleya...?"

It was not only because the massively thick red carpet tended to erase footsteps. Violet had showed herself without making a sound, dressed differently from her usual Auto-Memories Doll outfit. Her hair was loosely tied to one side and a flower ornament dangled next to her face. The word "lovely" was perfect to describe her neat, white one-piece with blue flower patterns. The small flowers were not simply dispersed, but had been designed to fall the way down from the top of her shoulders and middle of her chest. As Leidenschaftlich's climate was still warm even though summer was ending, it seemed that one would be fine with just a dress, yet she wore a dark blue cardigan as well. It was probably meant to hide her artificial arms. The same old

brooch stood on her chest.

"Heh, so you normally dress like this. It's kinda like a... young mistress? Pretty cute. How nice."

Violet replied, "It is my foster mother's taste. More importantly, did something happen?" Her blue eyes seemed to say, "What is the matter that caused you to come all the way to my house? Answer quickly."

"Yeah, kinda..."

Cattleya recalled her conversation with Hodgins. The hand that had been applying stamps had stopped for once, and he had told her how to coax Violet, who was someone shrouded in mystery, *"Listen, if you're going to persuade Little Violet... you gotta say that... it's a mission given to her by me."*

He had seemed confident. Indeed, Violet gave off an impression of obedience and chastity whenever she spoke to Hodgins. However, it was in a different manner than how she probably treated other people.

—*Honestly, this girl is so strange.*

Cattleya knew she was a former soldier. She had belonged to Leidenschaftlich's army along with Hodgins, the man Cattleya loved dearly. Amongst the members that Hodgins, who was already an odd one himself, had gathered to work at CH Postal Service, it was not so unlikely to have someone with a past of being an ex-militant in her personal history.

However, even without taking her history into consideration, Violet was a shady one.

She never showed a smile. Her speech was polite, yet she never once flattered anybody. With that, she put a distance between herself and others, but did not show any signs of despising loneliness, and was almost as a beautiful, heartless entity made of ice. Such was how Cattleya saw her.

"You... know... this... is something that had already been decided."

That was why she was anxious as to whether those magical words would have effect. Would Violet listen to the order of anyone other than Hodgins? Even if she did listen, would they have a fun time?

—*Still, that'd be better than going to the festival alone.*

Reassuring her purpose, Cattleya opened her mouth, “Violet. You... are coming with me. It’s a mission that President Hodgins gave you. Until the President joins me, accompany me to the Aeronautical Exhibition.”

After she spoke authoritatively, a few seconds of silence ensued.

The straight-laced, taciturn, unsociable-looking and beautiful ice girl blinked many times, her long lashes going up and down, before inquiring with a face that seemed to express a question mark, “A... mission?”

“Yes, a mission.”

“Is it... really a mission?”

Cattleya averted her gaze from the reflection of her own flustered figure in Violet’s limpid blue orbs. “I-If... you think it’s a lie, you can ask President about it.”

“No. Today is the closing day and he must be busy, so I will refrain from making phone calls. I understand. If it is a mission requested by the President, I will accept it.” Along with being concerned about the closing day, unlike Cattleya, she had the consideration of an adult for her workplace.

As she received consent, Cattleya soon became nervous. She had a feeling that she was talking to a machine, a fairy, or perhaps a ghost – some sort of indefinite existence that she could not reach a mutual understanding with.

“Hey, will you really go with me?”

“Yes.”

“Really, really?”

“Really, really.”

“You... sort of don’t feel like you’re alive, but you are, right?”

“I am.”

“I’m just asking this as a matter of course, but the President is very attached to you, so, are you lovers?”

“That is not it.”

“What do you think of Benedict?”

“Benedict? He has high-rank combat abilities, and also surprisingly has leadership skills.”

They were quite rude questions, yet Violet answered them seriously without showing signs of minding it.

Cattleya immediately became lively with the various replies. She let the joy take over her and started jumping on the spot. “I’m satisfied that our interests are consistent. Since it’s settled, go get ready! Tell the people of the house that you’re going out. Also, Violet, get writing paper, envelopes and a fountain pen too. We’ll participate in the Flying Letters, after all.”

“‘Flying Letters’... If I am correct, that was one of the aerial display custom programs presented to the public by the army and navy, right?”

As expected of a former soldier, she was knowledgeable.

Cattleya asked if she had ever participated, and Violet mutely shook her head. “I have never watched it, but I have been told about it as a piece of information...”

Just who had been the one to tell her? Violet did not reveal it.

“Cattleya, is there nothing else necessary other than the writing paper and etcetera? Do I have permission from President Hodgins to carry arms?”

“There’s no need for weapons. What’s with you? That’s scary.”

“You said it was a mission, so...”

Violet did not understand the limits of things, and Cattleya was sometimes perplexed by her, but thankfully, the two of them were able to go outside together.

The maneuvering area of Leidenschaftlich’s army’s Air Force was located far away from the capitol city, Leiden. The directions to it were not too difficult. The easiest way to get from the capitol to it was either through riding shared carriages or trucks. When getting off at the stop, a forested area surrounded by trees would be on sight. It was a place so full of greenery that it would cause people who were accustomed to cities to become worried for a second as to

where they had ended up at, but there was nothing to fear. Crossing a paved forest road while relying on signboards, they would shortly arrive at the maneuvering area, their destination.

The entry of ordinary citizens was normally prohibited, but there were no restrictions during the Aeronautical Exhibition. Authorized eating and drinking businesses established their shops around the exercise grounds and formed lined stalls. The military facility changed completely and turned into a place of festivities.

Men and women of all ages assembled at the venue. They were families of people involved in the army and navy personnel, general participants, avid airplane lovers who had come from distant places yearning to see the aerial displays, and many others. There were mostly males in the male-female ratio. Young girls like Violet and Cattleya could be considered minorities.

“Amazing, it’s so big. They normally practice here too... Look! Fighters? Are those fighters?” Cattleya did not hide her surprise at the warplanes being exhibited.

“That’s a reconnaissance plane, the Ptarmigan.” Meanwhile, Violet gave the exact name of the units. “Both the army and the navy each have Air Forces, but from the names of the planes, one can tell right away which of the two they belong to. The army names theirs after birds. It seems the navy names theirs after sea animals.”

The mysterious, beautiful women eagerly discussing about warplanes appeared peculiar to some extent.

Since the maneuver area usually functioned as a full-fledged military facility, there were many barred zones. Taking the space of the venue as a rectangular box, the exhibition of the military aircrafts was happening in the outskirts of its center. Surrounding it was a hangar, a stand-by lot for the army’s vehicles, a general resting spot for civilians, the actual headquarters of the Aeronautical Exhibition and a control tower built on its rooftop, hidden by a tent. Its inside could not be seen at all. A fence was laid around the headquarters and the control tower at a wide distance from both, and whoever was not part of the personnel was completely forbidden of entry.

One of the Aeronautical Exhibition's highlights, which was a live coverage by the army's publicity, was taking place at the headquarters.

"Please look at the front of the venue. Six fighters, the Sea Snakes, are raiding in. They are changing from a one-row line to a diamond-shaped battle formation. Do pay attention to this well-coordinated flight."

The navy fighters flew over the maneuver area and passed by while showing off splendid flight techniques. As they soared, white smoke was left behind in the blue sky as a proof of their passage.

"The first pilot is Jude Bradburn from Leidenschaftlich's Leiden. The second pilot is Henry Gardner from Bregand!"

All attendees looked up at the sky and cheered. An orchestra played music along with the heated commentaries, further enhancing the atmosphere in the place.

Cattleya opened the pamphlet that she had acquired in advance and confirmed the show time of the aircrafts currently on demonstration. Things seemed to be progressing according to the prescribed schedule. The Flying Letters were due afterwards.

She grabbed Violet, whose eyes had been stolen by the aerial maneuvers of the fighter planes, by the arm. "Hey, looks like the collecting of the Flying Letters will take a while, so let's buy something at the stalls and watch it while eating. It seems the flight exercises will go on non-stop. Violet, is there anything you wanna eat?"

"So we are ensuring our meals? If that is the case, is it not better to go for something fitting to be conserved rather than prioritize its taste?"

Without looking at Cattleya, Violet was moving her neck to follow the units in flight. Cattleya stirred a finger close to her. As Violet turned her head, her cheek was spontaneously stabbed by said finger. It felt flaccid.

"Violet, look at me."

Although the arm Cattleya had grasped was rigid, the cheek was soft.

--She's enigmatic, and a bit creepy.

However, Cattleya was somewhat relieved. It was because she had come to know that girl also had soft parts.

“Please stop.”

She became happy to earn a reaction from Violet, even though it was resistance. “Don’t wanna. That’s punishment for not looking my way. Hey, I feel you’re misunderstanding it; even though this is a mission, it’s also for fun. We don’t need conserved food.”



“‘Fun’...?”

“Don’t you... sometimes seem to have fun with Lux? Like, drinking tea and all.”

“Aah, yes. We have tea together.”

“That’s it. You’re gonna do that with me. We’re gonna eat, chat, and take part in the festival. It seems everyone from the company will be done with work in a bit, so we’ll join them afterwards.”

“This is... a mission, is it not?”

“It’s a mission. A great mission. A super great mission.” Cattleya forcefully had Violet, who was making emphases and seeking confirmation, walk in the direction of the stalls.

“I would like tangible content details on exactly what sort of mission ‘having fun’ is.”

“You’re talking kinda difficult; you aren’t used to having fun, right? That’s fine, this big sis will teach it to you.”

Violet stared at their joined hands as if it were something odd. Even so, she did not shake and disentangle hers, simply following behind Cattleya like an infant bird.

The duo visited the food stalls from one end to another of the fair, buying enough to be almost unable to carry everything in their arms and sharing it with each other. They softly narrowed their eyes upon observing children run after the flying fighters, harshly waved off men who carefreely called out to them due to being two unaccompanied women, and appreciated the commentaries from the army’s press while applauding the several warplanes passing by. They also had personal experiences with playground equipment, such as merry-go-rounds and darts, at a so-called emigrational amusement park, blending with the children. Although Cattleya had primarily been on guard regarding Violet, whose personality she could not to understand, she was able to think of ways to enjoy herself with the latter due to her characteristic amicability and liveliness.

“Cattleya, please wait. Cattleya.”

“Hey, this is delicious. Really delicious. Okay, open your mouth.”

“I do not wish to eat.”

“It’s a mission, so open your mouth.”

“Are you not just thinking I will go along with anything if you say it is a mission?”

“Aaahn. Hey, it’s gonna fall. If it does, it will be your fault.”

She was surprisingly weak to pressure, and therefore, Cattleya probably thought she was cute as a girl younger than herself whom she was taking along on her stroll. Acting as an older sister, too, was something comfortable for Cattleya.

After playing around for a while, the two of them decided to take a break. Even though it was the ending of summer, exposure to sunlight for a long time outside would cause increased fatigue. They sat on a bench at the general resting place, which was covered by a large tent that blocked the Sun, so that the civilians could cool down. They were able to watch the flight drills from there.

“Still not done?”

“We do not know the precise destination of these letters. Moreover, they must be of encouragement. This calls the abilities of an Auto-Memories Doll into question.”

Violet was writing for the Flying Letters. The gathered messages would be handed over to the pilots and scattered by airplanes from above the venue. Propeller-type light planes that would serve as the letters’ deliverers had already begun collecting them. The people in charge became the center of attention, women and children swarming over them all at once. That was possibly because their fuselage of a strong yellow color shone strikingly against the blue sky.

With nothing to do as she had finished writing her letter, Cattleya decided to prod her nose into Violet’s. The other was gradually becoming better at writing mails.

Seeking responsiveness, Cattleya pouted. “Hey, nobody will know who wrote it, so you can just say whatever you like.”

“This is no good. I will redo it.” Violet tucked the letter that she had just written into an envelope. She took out a new writing paper, but looked unable to write a single character. “What did you write, Cattleya?”

As she was apparently being asked for instructions, Cattleya answered while puffing out her ample bosom even more, “You are lucky for picking up my letter! Something good will definitely happen to you. Even if it doesn’t, it’s not like you will die’.”

“Is this what you wrote?”

“Yeah.”

That seemed very much like Cattleya. However, it appeared not to work as advice for Violet.

“What~? Do you not write letters outside of work or something? Is it really that troubling?”

“I have long stopped writing personal letters. I only write at work.”

Although it only happened for an instant, Cattleya was taken by the slight change in Violet’s expression. She was already someone with a disposition for getting close to others, but diminished the distance between herself and Violet even more. “This topic looks interesting. Why is that? Tell me.”

Violet moved away. Cattleya came closer. Violet moved away again. In the end, the two of them wound up perfectly glued to each other at a corner of the bench.

“Why should I?”

“Because it seems appealing. Why did you stop writing? Should I try guessing? The addressee was a man, right? And also someone special. The kind of man you’d be interested in the most, save for a parent or sibling.”

“How did you know the gender?” Violet gazed directly at Cattleya for the first time.

“Your clients and mine are different. My customers are... mostly young

women writing love letters. This is also the so-called ‘maidens in love’. It’s people who want to know what they should do to have a boy on the palm of their hand. Or guys who don’t understand women and want to know what they should do to make a girl look their way. I’m often asked for tips.”

“Is it not enough to simply poke her shoulder and call her name?”

“It’s not in that sense.” Cattleya flicked Violet’s forehead with her finger. “Hey, what kind of person is he? The one you like, I mean.”

“That... is not the... case.”

“So you hate him?”

“There... there is no way...”

Cattleya was unable to suppress a smile.

—*What do I do? She’s so fun to tease.*

Violet Evergarden – a secretive, straight-laced and expressionless taciturn. A woman made of iron, who never hesitated. She was crumbling at a single sentence from Cattleya.

“Then, isn’t there no option other than like? It’s not... the normal kind, right? That’s not what your face is saying. Don’t underestimate me. I make money out of including love consultations in my amanuensis job.”

Violet opened and closed her mouth, eyes darting to many directions, which showed she was at a loss.

—*She’s like a doll that has just been given a heart. How weird.*

Cattleya knew nothing of Violet’s past, and therefore merely treated her as what she was – a teenage girl.

“Hey. I said ‘hey’.”

She only wished to get along with her.

“Hey, what kind of person was he?”

She was alienated to the effects of her actions on Violet. She believed what lay inside the box that she was attempting to open was a gemstone.

“What do you call him?”

But what resided in Violet Evergarden’s heart...

“‘Major’.”

...could not be compared...

“‘Major’. Isn’t that cool? So he’s a soldier. You’re an ex-soldier, after all. How old is Major? What about his looks?”

...to a gemstone.

“I never asked. He was most likely about to become thirty years old.”

“No way. He’s much older than you. So the age difference between you two is... about the same as you and the President?”

Violet had not talked about that person for a long time.

“His hair was dark, but of a different shade than yours, Cattleya...”

She had described how he was as an individual before, but had never dug too deeply. Although he was someone that both she and Claudia Hodgins had in common, the two of them avoided touching the subject around one another.

Violet averted her eyes from the paper that she had not yet written anything on to the crowd. Soldiers wearing the purplish black uniform that she also used to were part of it. Even though the war was over, the skies had cleared and she no longer lived in the days when she did not know how to write a single word, that multitude and the clicking of military shoes brought her back to the time that she had spent in a city of lanterns.

Forever and ever, the person she pursued was only one.

“He had emerald green eyes...”

He was an extremely beautiful being.

“He took me in, raised and used me.”

The two of them were a tool and her master.

“But, he is not here anymore.”

Although she was his tool, she had failed to protect him.

“Gilbert is dead.” Hodgins’s words replayed in Violet’s head over and over, accompanied by a heaviness and agony similar to that of a curse.

“Did Major go somewhere far away?”

“Yes. He has gone far away. He has... not returned.”

“Are you still waiting?”

“Yes.”

At Cattleya’s questions, willingly or not, Violet wound up thinking...

“I am waiting.”

...about the answer to the words of that day, which she did not give, resisting it while claiming she did not understand them.

“I have been... repeatedly told to stop doing so. However, no matter what, I... I...”

“I love you.”

“I love you, Violet.”

“Are you... listening?”

“I... like you.”

“Violet, ‘love’... is...”

“To love’ is... to think that you want to protect someone the most in the world.”

“...find myself... waiting for Major to come.” Her face was of someone enduring pain.

That was the moment Violet showed her most humane expression out of the ones Cattleya had witnessed. A small transformation had occurred within that awkward girl. It was a quiet move, which people with abundant emotions would not consider a manifestation of feelings.

—*Aah.* A realization dawned within Cattleya.

They were not yet intimate. Not friends, either. It was not as if she knew anything about Violet, but she felt as though she had come to.

—*He took most of the happy parts of her heart with him. Is that why she doesn't have much emotion?* Cattleya speculated.

“You... have a crush on someone who isn’t here anymore.”

Unlike what Cattleya had imagined, the bush that she had been pricking was actually the entryway to a deep forest.

“Crush’?”

The young woman wandering inside said forest was not even aware of how she had become lost in it – she had a blindfold on and did not know how to take it off, left alone to live through fumbling about. Cattleya thought of it as a pity. In reality, that was not a conversation they should be having at such a place.

“What is... a ‘crush’?”

The doll whose heart had been taken away – her colleague who was younger than herself – did not know what infatuation was.

“No, it’s love already.”

“Lo-ve’...?”

The maneuver area was more crammed than when they had arrived. The crowd was increasingly more frantic.

Cattleya pointed at the people walking by. Everyone was of differing genders and ages. Each led lives packed with hardships that could not be seen through naked eye.

“There are many types of it: fraternity, friendship, siblinghood, companionship. Yours is romantic love.”

Harmonious couples that served as examples of it were everywhere. The world overflowed with romance in a natural manner.

Yet Violet denied it. She shook her head, furrowing her brows and biting her lip. “I... cannot... fall in love.” she obstinately negated.

“You did, though.”

“No, I cannot. I do not understand it.”

As seen from the sides, they probably appeared to be having an argument. It

was not a fight, yet neither of them backed a single step. One claimed it was love. The other claimed it was not. Both were running counter.

Though steeped in irritation, Cattleya still refused to give in. "Even I... can't say for sure what something like that is. Love is uncertain, and I don't get the romantic one very well. But I can tell when it happens. People in love would also be able to tell if they saw you. Your love is that type. Even if it's towards a person you're unable to see..."

Once the words "a person you're unable to see" spilled from Cattleya's mouth, Violet's blue eyes quivered in sorrow. Hearing them from someone else weighed much more than saying them to herself. The expression she sometimes had on was one that would cause anybody to admonish her with a, "See, you're making a face like that, so how come?"

"No, I cannot. I really... cannot... Major has..." still, Violet rebuffed it. Her long blond lashes were down. As Violet hung her head, her gaze went towards her own chest.

As always, her emerald green brooch lay there. It sparkled brilliantly, never fading.

"Major has..."

Even through springs of dazzling moonbows, summers of early rains, autumns of raging gold-leaf winds or winters of congealing frosty nights, just like the existence of the man named Gilbert Bougainvillea that resided within Violet, it would never fade.

"Major has passed away." the words she whispered in that very instant were exceedingly cruel.

The clock needle between Cattleya and Violet stopped for once. That did not happen in actuality, but the two of them did not make a single movement, as if time had truly come to a halt. Their blinking and breathing was mowed by the world's time axis for a second.

Once time finally started flowing again, Cattleya could only give a staggered reply, "E-Eh?" Her voice squeaked.

"He is dead. I was unable... to protect him... so Major... died. Even though I

was his tool, shield and sword.”

Cold sweat slowly traveled down Cattleya’s back.

—*Her heart was stolen... not by someone that's just not around, but that is dead?*

“That’s a joke, right?” Cattleya asked, but received no response from Violet. She failed an attempt to force a smile, which came out as a half-laugh. Her face twitched. At the indelicacy of the things that she had been saying until that point, her breath caught in her throat and she could not properly swallow her saliva. “Violet, did this person... die in the Great War?”

“Yes.”

“For real?”

“So I was told. This brooch... stayed with me as a relic.”

Ever since Cattleya had first met her, the object had been twinkling on her chest. She had witnessed Violet touching it every now and then with her artificial fingertips countless times. She had always wondered if it was some sort of protection charm.

There was a lot more that she had wanted to say in a rapid succession, yet her attitude was unwittingly cautious. Something buzzed within her.

“But, you... don’t... believe that... right?”

A thrill similar to an unpleasant presentiment crawled its way through Cattleya’s entire body. For Violet, the response to that question could be a taboo.

“Hey, answer seriously.”

As she remained silent, her profile, which Cattleya used to only see as dispassionate, was now reflected in the latter’s eyes as something solitary.

“I...”

The unpleasant disruption crept through Cattleya’s entire being, and she wished so badly to spit it out that she could not stand it. “You... don’t believe it, right? You did say... that you were waiting for him.”

She wanted to know the answer.

“But, President Hodgins has—”

“It’s fine; tell me what you yourself think.”

“Yes...” like a criminal accepting a conviction, Violet confessed her sin, “I believe... that Major... is alive.”

Just for how long had she continuously thought about that? Perhaps she had been in such a state ever since being informed of his death. Even as she lamented in anguish, even as she attempted to destroy the hope that kept her attached to reality, she might still have denied it all, telling herself that he was alive.

“You... You...”

“What the hell are you doing?” was what Cattleya wanted to scream.

Romantically yearning for someone who was far away and blindly loving someone who was deceased were two different things. Just as with Violet and Cattleya, physical distance could be overcome with effort. However, the dead could never return.

“What you’re saying... is the same as getting your arms back!”

Simply spending her time unreasonably through doing something so fruitless, never allowing anyone else to love her beautiful self and believing in the existence of a dead person was a waste, and Cattleya wanted to lecture her into stopping immediately. There was substitution both for her arms and for the man of her affections.

“Do you plan to live like this forever from now on? You, Violet...”

“I am aware.” Violet said right away. “It is useless. There is no meaning to it. There is no gain from it. But without Major, I am the same. I have no meaning.”

“Would it be no good if it were someone else? Even if it’s hard now, he will definitely become just a memory one day, so while there’s still time...”

“No... no.” It was almost as though she were proclaiming war against everything that lived. “Major Gilbert Bougainvillea is the only one for me.”

Cattleya stiffened with her mouth agape. Perhaps because a popular unit had passed by in the sky above, cheers rose in their surroundings.

It was as if Violet was there, yet not. That was the bizarre feeling that those strong blue orbs brought about.

—*What's... with this girl? How can she manage to make people this sad, as if cutting them open?*

Her values differed too much from Cattleya's. Feelings that had nowhere to go swirled within the latter's chest painfully.

“I understand that this conduct of mine makes people uncomfortable.”

What had she had to live through to develop so much stubbornness?

“Do ignore me. Please... leave me be.”

“You're... an idiot, aren't you?”

Even if it were criticized as futile and she were stigmatized as irrational for many years, she would most likely continue to believe it. Even with someone telling her “it's no use; quit it”, she would merely cover her ears.

“Yes. I am an idiot... and a fool.”

She only desired one person.

Cattleya slapped her own forehead with one hand and growled like a dog. Thinking too much had her tremendously heated-up, and her head started to hurt. She was currently even more feverish than when coming up with phrases during amanuensis activities.

—*This is no good.*

Violet had always, always carried a wish.

—*Even someone not so smart like me can tell.*

“I want to see you, I want to see you”.

—*This is like threatening to push down a child crying by a cliff.*

She had been praying while firmly grasping her brooch.

—*I can't blame her.*

Such idiocy was Violet Evergarden herself.

As if vomiting a silver poison, Cattleya said bitterly, “Got it. I got it. You’re... stupid, and... I think... it would be great if you cut it out... I seriously do, but I also think... there are things... that can’t... be helped.”

The shine of those blue eyes changed. “Really? President Hodgins tells me to stop it.”

She patted Violet’s shoulder with a plop. Cattleya actually wanted to side with Hodgins, but she also wanted at least herself to be Violet’s ally.

“That’s because love is necessary for living. Isn’t love like a symbol of happy things? Couples get married, and one of them dies at some point... but the other relies on the memories they have of that person; something like that. It doesn’t have to be romance... the love that you receive is never gone. Parents also count. I... ran away from home and was taken in by President Hodgins. There... were many moments of loneliness for me since I had no acquaintances here. I had terrible parents, but the times when they caressed my head... those kinds of things... whenever I was desolate, I would always end up remembering them...”

Violet, who had not known about Cattleya’s circumstances, replied with a, “Is that so?”

The two of them were now finally speaking face-to-face. Their conversation was one-sided no more.

“So love... is a... necessity?”

“It is. What do you rely on to live? You’ve had times in your life until now in which you were treated kindly, and things and words that you were happy to receive, right? It’s because they are... accumulated inside of you... that you are alive.”

“Bu... t...” Violet said in pauses, “even if I had nothing, I... would have been living.”

Cattleya tilted her head to the side. She did not understand the meaning of those words.

“Even now, I am alive. I cannot forget about Major. That is why... this is not love.”

Cattleya did not know that Violet used to live alone in an isolated island. She concluded on her own that Violet living even while having nothing referred to the period before she had met the major.

“Violet, hey.”

“That... is not my case. I am a tool, so to begin with, things of this sort that are...”

“Listen to me. A ‘tool’... what are you saying? Is it... because you’re an ex-soldier? You mean warriors are tools? Aren’t you... being rude to the people who protected this country?”

“That is not it. Ever since way before, I... was a tool, so if I do not... remain as one...”

Perhaps due to Violet not being able to express herself very well, Cattleya strongly gripped her automated fingers.

“I will be of no requirement for Major.”

Once she did so, they could not easily be untangled.

“I am not a person. I am no good... if I am not a tool. If I do not stay as a tool... I will be unable to fight properly. I would also lose the right of wishing to be by Major’s side. For the sake of wishing to be beside Major, and for being someone’s tool, things of that nature... must be inhibited.”

Cattleya’s head, still tilted, continued leaning sideways more and more, until it seemed like she would fall from the bench. “Wait, I wanna get this straight.” She raised her palm a little, restraining her position.

“All right.” Violet obediently consented. She waited for Cattleya to sort everything out.

“Your Major is dead.”

“Yes.”

“But you like him and have always been waiting for him. You believe he’s

alive."

"I do believe that he is living."

"I think that's love. You're in love too. But you say that's not it... because you might stop being useful for the deceased Major otherwise."

"Yes."

"You're forcing yourself into not knowing love... and wanting to be a tool... because it's a way for you to be with him. I don't get what you're... saying. You, Violet... I mean, there's no reason for you to fight anymore, right? Major passed away, and you're no longer a soldier."

"Yes." Maybe due to such reality being unfavorable for Violet, her answer came out low.

"You left the army, and now you're working at our place, right? Do you understand that your motive to deny it by saying that you don't need love and that it's not love doesn't exist anymore?"

"I... am... aware."

Violet fell silent after that. She was pondering on what to say. Averting her orbs from hers and Cattleya's laced fingers, she raised her face after looking down for a while. As she was at last about to open her mouth, Violet suddenly widened her eyes significantly.

She had found something.

What was reflected in her big, jewel-like blue irises was a tall man. The man continuously appeared and disappeared within the crowd. Her hand naturally stretched towards him.

"...jor." Violet said something in an awfully reduced tone, lips trembling.

The man had lustrous black hair.

"Hey, I won't be able to understand it if you stay quiet. Then why is it that you refer to yourself as a tool?" Tired of waiting for the other's response, Cattleya cut the stillness and called out to her.

As she did so, Violet abruptly stood up. Cattleya was surprised at her serious

profile.

"S-Sorry. Did you get angry?" she asked fearfully, and Violet replied with a "no".

"In case..." Violet took one, two steps away from the bench, acting as though her heart was not there, drawn into the direction of the crowd.

"Violet?"

As her name was called, Violet turned back towards Cattleya for once. "In case that person is alive, this is for the sake of being able to function properly... if a time in which he would need me comes. Cattleya, I will excuse myself for a little." Her expression was no longer the one of just a short while before, empty as a ghost.

"Eh, wait...! Where are you going?!"

"I must go after him. I will definitely make it back to the mission."

"After who!?"

Who was it that she had to chase, even it meant leaving Cattleya behind?

Cattleya got up in a haste as well. However, their belongings and letters ended up dropping and rolling down at her feet.

"My... former user." After saying only that, Violet vanished into the mass of people.

Still standing, Cattleya was dumbfounded. "Eh, Major?" It finally came to her who the person was. "Violet, hey, wait."

Nevertheless, it was too late. She was already gone. Since she was calm and delicate, her feet almost did not seem so fast, yet her agility was indeed that of a soldier.

"I'm alone, you know." Cattleya grumbled, although her shock surpassed her solitude. As she had no other choice, she picked up the belongings that had fallen and scattered – fountain pens, writing papers, envelopes, the letter she herself had written.

And...

“Ah.” She found one more letter lying on the ground. It was not her own.

That was Violet’s unfinished message. She had put it in an envelope and left it on her lap as it was. It was the one that she had claimed to be unable to compose appropriately and had stopped writing.

Cattleya had not noticed it when Violet was writing, but once she took it in her hands, she thought it was a rather charming item. Since Auto-Memories Dolls frequently used paper and envelopes for writing on people’s behalf, those were often mass-produced by the companies they belonged to. Even so, of course, they would prepare ones fitting for their clients to have at hand, but what Violet had brought from home was obviously different in quality. A bordering of silver roses as drawn on a white paper that felt good to the touch. She had most likely bought it with her own savings.

—*Even though she had said that she didn’t write personal letters anymore...*

People who had the habit of writing letters would be able to tell that those were treasured articles. They were selected in a way that the marvelousness of the paper and envelope would already be enough to convey the respect of the sender towards the addressee. They could not be guaranteed as decent just from being expensive. But the ones that had been chosen emanated prominence just by looking.

Cattleya stared at the direction Violet had disappeared into. The figure of a girl running with her golden hair swaying was not there anymore.

“This is punishment for leaving me by myself.” With mean spirit and curiosity, Cattleya decided to try reading what was inside.

Afterwards, once Violet came back as she had stated, Cattleya would tease her about it. Since the latter had said she was unable to write it properly, the contents were unmistakably boring. It was with that in mind that Cattleya had skimmed through the paper.

“Foolish girl.”

The inside was not what Cattleya had expected. She soon finished reading, for it was only one sheet. She slowly traced Violet’s handwriting with her fingertips.

—*I wonder why. Why... did she have... to write like this...*

What was written in there were private affairs completely unrelated to Cattleya. She had only just become able to talk to the other on that day. There was a limit to how much empathy she could feel.

—...with words that... seem to gouge people's hearts?

Nevertheless, a film of tears gradually formed in her amethyst eyes. She could not bear to imagine how Violet had felt during the conversation they had had on that very day, or what sort of memories she had been living with.

The contents of the letter were:

Are you well? Has anything changed? Where are you right now? Do you not have any troubles?

Spring, summer, autumn and winter have gone by, and repeat on forever, but only the season in which you are here does not come. Whenever I am waking up, falling asleep or feeling hazy, I find myself looking for your figure. I do not dream often, so I feel as if I might forget your appearance. Repeatedly, repeatedly, I replay memories of you in my head.

Are you really nowhere anymore? I have walked so much around the whole world. I have been to many countries. You were not in any of them. I have not found you. Still I search. Even after having been told that you had passed away, still I search.

I am following my order. I am alive. I live, live and live. What is there after life is over? Although I do not know, I merely keep on living. Even so—

Violet grasped the arm of the black-haired man. "Please wait."

The man, who had turned around, possessed the emerald green orbs so typical of the Bougainvillea.

Chapter 12: The Flying Letters and the Auto-Memories Doll (Part 2)

In cities, villages and even forests, those touched by the winds laughed at its greatness. The raging gale's sounds were a melody of rattlings. With the grace of the Sun, limpid blue skies blessed the people below.

On that day, the wind had suddenly become strong from afternoon to evening. The vigorous airstream was almost as a dragon undulating its body and trampling down the earth. Wherever the gust dragon passed by, the sounds of leaves and cries of birds and insects chorused. Surrounded by woods, the site of Leidenschaftlich's army's Air Force base became the wind's playground as well.

Heaps of guests who had just arrived exited a passenger truck that had been going on repeated trips every now and then for the sake of the special day. As its interior became empty, it once again returned to the city. The people who had descended from it crossed the forest road while chatting cheerfully amongst one another. As they walked through the tree path, their roars and joyful voices rose at the profound, swiveling sound of fighter airplanes dancing in the sky.

The seventh Aeronautical Exhibition was taking place.

In that midst, the figures of members of CH Postal Service, led by Claudia Hodgins, were also present. From clerks who had been working in the office to postmen who were done with their deliveries, they all walked with faces enveloped in a feeling of liberation.

“Brighten up, Little Lux.”

While everyone else seemed to be having fun, Lux alone had a sour expression. The president, who was now over thirty years old, desperately attempted to talk to her in order to make her smile.

Thinking that she was being a child herself, Lux spit out the incomprehensible feelings in her heart, “No, it's not like I'm in a bad mood. I... Something I

couldn't do anything about no matter what... was solved with a single statement from you, President... I've once again come to understand how things work in this world; I'm merely climbing up the stairs of adulthood... This world is so..."

"Was it so bad to have the public office extend the deadline? But, look. Thanks to that, we were able to bring everyone from the company to the festival. I... had also wanted to do something for everyone, since they did their best at work because they had wanted to come here..."

"But that receptionist from the public office was your ex, right, President Hodgins?"

"Aah... well, was she?" He answered vaguely, as she was actually not someone who could be counted as a lover, for the two of them merely happened to know each other's naked bodies.

"In short, you have a relationship of sympathy, in which you normally overlook one another... that's why, if I had been the one to ask the favor, it would have been useless... that's why..."

Hodgins had been observing Lux, who was making several different comic faces, with worry at first, but it gradually turned into amusement and he wound up laughing. The childishness of that girl, who was still alienated to the subtleties of human relations despite having become able to do quite a lot of work, and therefore remained too innocent, was adorable.

"Little Lux. Getting frustrated over something like this is no good. You're my secretary, so you'll have to keep steadily learning my dirty ways from now on. The president's statements are...?"

"A-Absolute."

What was he trying to make her learn?

"You're lacking energy. One more time. The president's statements are...?"

"A-Absolute!"

Hodgins patted Lux's head in satisfaction. "Little Lux is so cute. I'll raise you into a great member of society."

As he continued caressing her the same way one would do with a dog or a cat, his hand was caught by the other employees.

“President, you’ll be arrested for that. By the military police.”

“Lux, too, shouldn’t follow what the President says. You’re the company’s star of hope, so you must fight back against anything inappropriate like you intend to stab the President.”

“Aren’t you all terrible?”

The clerks laughed, and Lux naturally ended up laughing as well. Upon looking at them, Hodgins was finally relieved. He was no good with women making gloomy expressions.

—*Now, on to the other girl that I’m worried about.*

After entrusting some warrant money from his own wallet for Lux to buy everyone something they wanted, Hodgins left to look for Violet and Cattleya. Someone had said that he would find them if he went on walking, but the number of guests attending the Flying Letters was double the previous time and breaking a record. The base of the Air Force itself was extensive, so he believed it would be a difficult task.

—*I had tried to motivate them to get along with each other, but I wonder if I managed it.*

Unlike Violet and Lux, those two were a pair with a questionable success rate for promoting the growth of a friendship. However, as Hodgins had Gilbert and himself as an example of triumph, he wanted to bet that the two of them could surprisingly become friends. He was out of touch with Gilbert at the moment, but tried not to think about it.

Without walking aimlessly, Hodgins headed straight to the general resting place. Several hours had passed ever since Cattleya had left the office. They must have had a good time seeing most of the displays and booths.

He realized that being tall was useful in that kind of situation. It did not take too long for him to find Cattleya. There was no way that such a strikingly beautiful woman, who could even be considered pompous, would not stand out.

Cattleya was sitting alone on a bench, seeming lonely.

“So I failed?”

As he attempted to call out to her with a “heey”, another man came to talk to Cattleya first. He held onto her arm as she intentionally ignored him, in order to forcefully make her stand up. He was probably inviting her to walk around the festival with him.

“This is bad...”

Hodgins was not worried about Cattleya. He walked fast, pushing his way through the crowd.

“Don’t touch me in such a familiar manner!”

As he heard the shout of a high-pitched voice, he shoved people without holding back. However, Hodgins was one step too late for the rescue. Cattleya had steadily stood up and reversed the arm that had been gripped, quickly freeing herself, then grabbed the man by the chest area of his clothes and dove a knee into his crotch. It was most certainly an unimaginable pain. The man lay on the ground without moving.

As Cattleya intended to send more blows, Hodgins stopped her by calling out, “Cattleya, come here!”

“Ah, President!” Looking happy, she waved at him and ran in his direction.

Letting out a skeptical chuckle, Hodgins waved back.

Cattleya jumped into his chest. Although the gazes from the surrounding people were hurtful, he prioritized Cattleya’s mental state. He embraced her gently once, then stepped back, receiving a full-fledged smile as he asked if she was all right.

“Guess I didn’t make it in time...”

“President, were you trying to help me out? I don’t lose. But, I see... if I act feebly in these kinds of situations, you will try to save me. I should have left it as that for a few more seconds.”

“No, hum. That’s right.” He did not admit that the one he had been trying to save was the man. “But, y’know, Cattleya... I’m sure I told you that you should

try to resolve things peacefully at times like these..."

"I didn't use my fists. I thought a former martial artist like me shouldn't do that with an ordinary person, so I used my legs. Because my legs aren't that strong. Praise me, praise me, President."

The young woman named Cattleya Baudelaire was of a glossy beauty that seemed like she could have plenty of men on the palm of her hand with just a glance, but on the inside, she was like a puppy. She was innocent and naïve, as well as vehement, since there were no bad intentions in whatever she did. Perhaps because she had confidence in her physical strength, she had the habit to solve anything by force.

"It's great that you didn't let yourself get caught up by some strange man, but excessive self-defense is no good, so points off. Let's leave this spot. People are staring."

"Praise meee... ah, hum... but..."

Crawling onto the ground, the man who had collapsed escaped while the two were talking.

After sparing a glimpse at his state, Cattleya turned back to Hodgins. "I have to stay here. Violet ran off somewhere. But she said she'd come back to this place. If I leave, we'll end up missing each other."

"'Ran off somewhere'... meaning you don't know where to?"

"Yeah. I think she probably... went to chase after that person she calls 'Major'."

Hodgins lost his voice at Cattleya's words. His face astonished, he grabbed her shoulders with uneasy and trembling hands. "A black-haired man in a military uniform!?" It was rare of him to speak so loudly.

Perhaps his unrest was transmitted to Cattleya, and she began to shake as well. "I-I don't know. I didn't see him. But Violet said he was her user in the past."

"Which way did she go!?"

Pinned down by such a threatening attitude, Cattleya pointed towards the

crowd, her finger oscillating feebly. "T-That way... but, it's been a while since she left."

"I'll go after her. I'm bringing her back. Sorry, Cattleya, but everyone from the company is heading to the Flying Letters' retrieval place, so go meet with them there."

"E-Eeh, I'll be on my own again?"

"You're a good girl so go there! Okay?! And no reckless quarreling even if someone picks on you!"

"President!" Cattleya was about to chase after Hodgins as if to hang onto him, but gave up halfway. She was somewhat exhausted.

She wound up sighing as she had watched someone's back while they broke into run for the second time that day. There was no helping it since she could not oppose Hodgins, who looked after Violet as something like a substitute parent, and so, Cattleya started walking totteringly. While thinking it would be great if she became someone whom others would pursue as well, she was lonely once again.

—*Is today a good or a bad day? I wonder which.* She thought.

She added the fact that she had become able to talk a little with Violet to the score. The fact that the latter had left Cattleya earned a subtraction. She soon would join the people from the agency and not be lonely anymore. One more score. However, Hodgins putting Violet before her earned a subtraction. Comprehensively, after evaluating the ups and downs of her feelings, she could say that her current situation was of having a bad day.

The reason why she disliked being alone was because it made her feel as if she had no charm.

People naturally gathered around charismatic individuals. Hodgins was one of them. Cattleya had also been attracted to him as a butterfly would be to honey. Yet she understood that she could not become like him.

She chewed her lips lightly. Her heart was withering. It was supposed to be an extremely wonderful beginning of month, and the part of her that had been looking forward to it since the previous one was awfully depressed.

“Hey, stupid woman. You alone?”

It was depressed, and yet...

“Benedict...”

...her tears went right back in at the ironic sentence as she was called from behind.

Meanwhile, Violet Evergarden, the center of that whirlpool, was facing a man as if confronting him. Away from the crowd, the two of them stood under the shadow of the plum trees that surrounded the maneuver area, almost looking like a couple. It was not as if they were completely unnoticeable as seen from the venue, so from a distance, they probably appeared as though having a secret date.

“It has been a while.”

Black hair. Green orbs. The man glared at Violet with said green orbs as if annoyed. While it had seemed she would lose him in the flow of people many times, from the moment she was finally able to grab his arm and stop him, he had looked sullen.

“Please wait.”

Roughly yanking the arm that Violet had grasped, the man turned around. Perhaps because her grown-up figure was too different from the last time he had seen her, the man’s reaction was slightly delayed.

As he realized who the other was, he unabashedly clicked his tongue and shoved her away by the shoulder. “Don’t touch me.”

He was very much like the man Violet had recalled, but still different. He eyed her with disgust as she did not budge a single inch even after being thrust away, her torso accepting the impact.

“You might not remember me, but...”

“I do. There’s no way I’d forget the killer weapon that massacred my comrades.”

Gilbert’s older brother, Dietfriet Bougainvillea, stood there.

Violet blinked slowly once at the words that pierced straight through her. Dietfriet was unlike Edward Jones, whom she had previously met, but still keenly similar in the fact he attempted to expose her past.

"I see." Violet simply replied in acknowledgement.

"What're you doing...? Someone like you has to be under watch. What happened to your Master?"

Dietfriet wore the navy's high-collar uniform. Perhaps he was stopping by for duty-related matters.

As Violet found herself unable to answer, Dietfriet clicked his tongue and added, "I don't mean Gilbert. You've been taken in and are being used by his friend as of late, right? Hurry back there. Don't cling to me." He gestured as though shooing a dog.

"You were aware?"

Violet's attitude as she spoke smoothly was probably deemed as confusing for Dietfriet. When he had met her, she was a monster of low intelligence that could not utter a word.

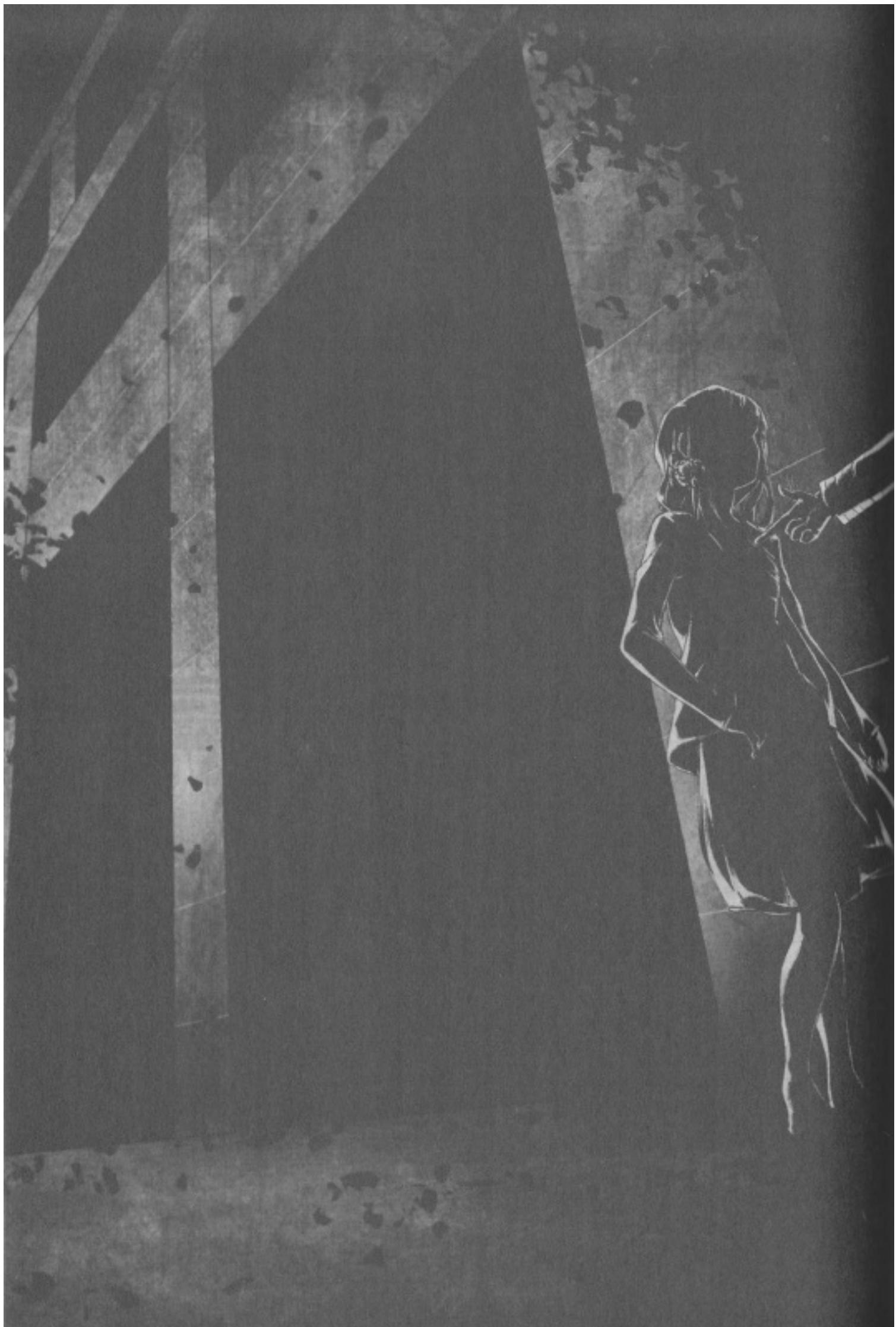
"Don't screw around." He stared at her as if her beautiful appearance and grown-up figure instigated more fear within him. "This concerns my sibling. And mishandling. That's obvious. It's my little brother we're talking about. Now come, I get anxious seeing you in the middle of a crowd." Dietfriet displayed irritation. In light of his wrath, he forcefully grabbed Violet's arm. As a grinding creak resounded, he let go of it in surprise. He looked at the arm and then at Violet's face.

The two of them were tense. Like an herbivore encountering a carnivore amidst a prairie, both were at loss as to who would move first.

"I am not... carrying any weapons. I will not kill anyone. I was told... to not kill anymore. And I... will not do it even if ordered to." Violet unveiled both hands as to emphasize that she was unarmed.

"Like I can believe you. Is that really so? You... are a tool that wants nothing but orders, right? I've let go of you, but if I ordered something, wouldn't you do it? Hey. You used to do that when I commanded you in the past, didn't you?"

“I will not.”



Dietfriet thrust a finger-gun onto Violet's chest. His nail lightly pierced her cleavage. It seemed her self-defense reaction would awaken at the raw feeling of being touched by the long fingertip of a man. Her usual self would have taken action upon it immediately. However, she did not move.

"Kill yourself."

Violet's breathing halted. It was still for one, two, three seconds. Although air soon filled her body again, her face remained pale. Even the sound of her heartbeats felt as if it would stop at the words she received from the man that reminisced, in looks, vestiges of the one she respected and loved.

And yet, Violet responded, "I will not. I have been... ordered to live." The reply she gave with utmost effort was mixed with sorrow.

"Seriously? Close call. I thought about this... after I had handed you over to Gil... He told you not to die or something, right...? Really, what a close call. He's a softie. It would have been better if you had died while being used by Gilbert. And yet you're still alive and kicking. Even now... I still visit the families of the people you killed to give them money."

The field of vision of Violet's blue eyes grew unsteady. The fingertip that was pulled away from her had not drawn blood, yet those words impacted her painfully in the same way that physical violence would.

"If... there... is... something I can—"

"I don't need anything!! Not from you!"

As he raised his voice, he attracted others' attention. The duo wound up seeming like a man in a military uniform intimidating a civilian woman.

"You, too, leave. Just leave."

"I still... have questions."

Dietfriet exhaled a deep, deep sigh. He scratched his bangs and scowled at Violet as if he truly did hate her. And so, he proceeded to grasp the artificial arm that he had once pushed. "Then come with me in a way that wouldn't look weird to everyone else. We're going to another place."

By presumption, Violet came as close to Dietfriet as she could. The guests

nearby most likely believed they merely had a lover's quarrel.

The two walked mutely for a while. Dietfriet's consideration in his manner of guiding a lady was proportional to the abusive language he had used on Violet. Whether or not it was something he did on automatic without meaning to could be conjectured in his facial expression. He was wearing the navy's uniform, after all. Such behavior might be conventional. That is, walking as if being protected by an adult man.

It was not Violet's first time treading through a scenery of people laughing joyfully with her hand being pulled by someone in a military uniform, yet it was overall a rare life experience. The situation was completely different from the previous time. The person she had chased, the height of his line of sight upon looking at her, everything.

The full-fledged former female soldier reached out for her emerald brooch naturally. Her child self might have been the invincible one. The grown-up Auto-Memories Doll Violet was wavering in apprehension.

Once the number of people had diminished, Dietfriet released her arm as if throwing her away.

"You have any business with me? If it's about resentment, I won't listen."

"I do not... resent you."

Dietfriet snorted. "I wonder about that. I get praises and grudges from many directions. I have that sort of personality, after all. Sometimes, I feel as if I'll be detonated just like that."

"I will not do it. I will not do... such a thing to you."

At Violet's response, his green eyes strained indescribably. A fury unlike his primary disdain was encompassed in said eyes.

As if being jostled by Dietfriet while he approached her, Violet took a few steps back. Her spine stuck against the trunk of a big tree, but as she intently stared back at him without averting her gaze regardless, a fist flew next to her face. She was not hit, but a piece of wood scratched her cheek. She was not the only one who bled. With a side-glance, she confirmed that blood was shed from Dietfriet's fist.

“Do you remember...? When you were small, I used to punch and kick you.”

“Yes.”

“Whenever I didn’t feel your killing intent, you would receive a certain degree of violent treatment from me. When I’m with you, I become a monster too... you make me like this.”

“I... make you...?”

“That’s right. It’s your fault. It’s like that even now. Being with and talking to you infuriate me. My heart can’t rest. You do that to me. You killed my companions. What happened back then appears in my dreams over and over. But though I’m disgusted to hell by you, I don’t despise you. No, it might be that I simply hate you so much I can’t handle it, but it doesn’t feel like spite. It’s closer to giving up. I think I have no choice but conform to the fact a defective asset like you exists in this world... have you any idea why?” Dietfriet punched the tree once again with his other fist.

Violet did not look away. She earnestly stared at the other with those blue eyes. Perhaps because they were too blue and clear, they wound up bringing about a feeling of exposure to Dietfriet.

“One of my comrades that you killed had tried to rape you. That’s why you murdered him. Everything, everything, everything, everything goes in circles! It’s because it all goes in circles...! That’s why I don’t resent any of it.” Dietfriet said.

“The things... that I did... and that you did to me...?”

“That’s right. Hasn’t anyone told you?”

Violet lightly shook her head. “No, I have been told about it.”

As if hitting the mark, Hodgins’s prediction now befell upon Violet, *“And then, for the first time, you’ll notice the many burns you have. You’ll realize that there’s still fire at your feet. You’ll realize that there are people pouring oil onto it. It might be easier to live without knowing all this. There will certainly be times when you’ll end up crying as well.”*

Until the time when her eyelids would close for eternity, she would not know

the feeling of having her body burn. Such was the monster she had been destined to be. Yet the monster, the tool, **Violet** was currently living as a person. She had been doing so ever since she had cried when bringing a deceased youth back to his hometown – rather, way before that. Despite sniffing the smell of herself being wrapped and scorching in flames, she had chosen to ‘live’.

“And that’s why, even if you begrudged me, I would tell you, ‘like I care’.”

There was a reason why she had chosen to live as a person. Except, that was the sole shining light in the monstrous girl’s life.

“You are mistaken, that is not it... my apologies for stopping you. I had... simply... wanted to ask about Major.”

Dietfriet slowly loosened his fist. Blood welled in his white knuckles. “He turned into a complete mess thanks to you, but what about him?”

“What should I do?”

“Haah?”

Violet Evergarden asked Dietfriet Bougainvillea, “Although I am... a tool, I was unable to protect him. But... he told me to live, hence why I am living. If there is... anything else... that I... could do, I wish you to tell me. Is it all right... for me to be alive? I end up... overflowing with sensations. Sensations... from being involved with people. Just from being involved with them. Even though... I am Major’s tool... I was... told to live... I... towards Major...”

The two of them used to be a monster and her keeper, a wielder and his tool. Everything in their relationship had changed.

“As if I’d know!! Why are you asking me!?”

Even so, the servant pursued teachings from her former master.

“Because I used to be... your tool.”

The monster he had taken from an isolated island had developed, became able to speak and was trembling in restlessness.

“If you’re a tool, don’t go having a will of your own!”

Trembling in restlessness and seeking for help.

“Because... you... used to be... my... Master.”

Dietfriet was caught off-guard by Violet’s statement.

—*Did you think I was your Lord?*

Violet’s blue orbs were beautifully limpid. Therefore, they caused Dietfriet to reminisce to the things he had made her do in the past like a mirror.

“As if I give a damn about a tool I threw away! You’re a monster and a calamity that destroyed my little brother’s life!”

The things people did to others came back to them through time.

“Sir Dietfriet... then, why is it... that you... gave me to Major?”

Pain and gentleness came back to him. It was a gaze that seemed to shoot in his direction. One that was hanging onto him, but that did not say so. Those were the same eyes she had showed Dietfriet when parting ways with him. He had been pierced by such gaze and brought her with him from that remote island, leaving her to his younger brother, who was the only member of their family that he had contact with.

Why had he handed her over to Gilbert? It was as Violet had said.

She was a useful tool, yet Dietfriet had deemed her as too much for him. He did not believe he had a concrete proof that his younger brother could properly use her as he had entrusted her to him. The fact that he could have kept her alive and sold her must have run through his head. It felt as if Gilbert had been pressed on by Dietfriet.

What did Dietfriet have in mind when leaving Violet to Gilbert? Was there really no one as option except for Gilbert? What about the other navy officers? Back then, there must have been additional choices. Yet he gave her away to his family.

“Do you understand human feelings?” Dietfriet stretched out his hands to grab Violet’s collar.

Did he want to hit her? Did he want to kill her? Or perhaps was it a lecture?

"If you do, then die. Accept my wrath and grief. But you... won't die even if I tell you to, right?"

"Yes."

"I won't die either. And I don't want to understand... what you're puzzled about. I've been doing things much worse than you did for a living. But so what? I'm alive. When I die, it'll be over. Even I have laments and hardships. There are also times when I think dying would be much better, and at those moments, I consider doing so. You keep making a face like you're the only one having it hard; everyone has it hard. The guys you killed wouldn't have died had they not gotten involved with me. It might have been my fault. Since I was the commander. I wasn't able to protect them while leading them. But, y'know, Monster... if you... have the slightest remorse for what you did, and won't die no matter what... live on, until you get killed by someone or your lifespan runs out. Rather than dying..."

Did he want to hit her? Did he want to kill her? Or perhaps...

"...it's harder to stay alive."

Perhaps...

"It's way harder to stay alive. Still, swallow all of it down and live on. It just so happens that those who can't do this end up dying. If you won't die by your own hands, never blame your sins on anyone, and live on. Live, live..." Dietfriet suddenly let go of Violet's collar, "and then die."

Violet regarded Dietfriet with a gaze unlike the one she would give Gilbert, but it was certainly of someone who was looking at her Lord. "Sir Dietfriet. Has Major really... passed away?"

"What do you... want me to say?"

At his words, Violet inhaled an abrupt breath. She could see something glistening in the sky. "You will not... say 'yes', as everyone else, will you? I have just confirmed it. If Major had died, you would definitely, by all means... already have killed me."

Within Violet's field of vision, something fell from the blue skies over

Dietfriet's head, like snow, like flowers.

"He is alive, right?"

The Flying Letters were raining down. A gush of wind swabbed in-between the two, blowing fiercely with a rumble. The letters flowed about like a blizzard.

Yellow planes flew as if cutting the sky open. They scattered the letters that carried the feelings of many, so as to deliver them to the people below. It was as if they meant to say, "Choose one from these. The letter you will pick upon its fall will cheer for your fate."

"Violet!" Within a deprived line of sight, someone yelled Violet's name and forcefully carried her as if she were luggage.

Dietfriet's figure grew farther and farther away. She attempted whispering his name, but could no longer reach him. The last she saw of him was as he suddenly turned on his heels. He did not spare a single glance in her direction.

Violet then called out to the person running after having desperately abducted her, "President... Hodgins."

"Keep your head low!"

"Everything is fine, President Hodgins."

"It's not! Why... are you with such a dangerous person!?"

Violet checked once more the spot of the shining object that she had confirmed earlier. Nothing could be seen there anymore.

"It really is all right. I had already noticed that I was under the aim of his underling's sniper rifle from that hill."

"'Sniper', you say...!?"

"His bodyguards were not together with him, but once I was close to him, I was able to sense the danger. That person... had always walked around with bodyguards... so I knew it when I did not see them. But that was merely for watch. He did not have any intention to give a signal. President Hodgins, is work going well?"

Her calmness was usually reliable, but he could not say so in such a situation.

Hodgins replied with anger and impatience blended with relief, “I was thinking Cattleya would cry, so I ended it as soon as possible... and then, I heard you had gone after a man in military uniform... I got chills. Don’t ever go see Gilbert’s older brother, Little Violet. Though that person is related to Gilbert by blood, they’re completely different people. Even if he’s your former Lord, you can’t. He’s a scary one. He... hates you. I was careless... From now on, even if it’s a festival, we won’t participate in this. I thought you were going to be dragged back into the military... I’ll have you go back home for today. Okay?”

“Yes.”

“Did he say anything? Are you all right?”

Violet didn’t answer immediately. She stretched a hand towards the sky. Still being carried by Hodgins, she took one letter in her hands.

“Hey, did he say anything weird? Little Violet?”

She picked the thoughts of a person directed to another.

“No, no. Nothing... I’ve only... received something.”

“*Live.*”

“What was it?”

“*Without ever blaming anyone, live. Live. Live.*”

“Encouragement.”

“*And then die.*”

Dietfriet walked amidst the dispersed letters. He distanced himself from the center of the maneuver area, on which people were going crazy about the Flying Letters, entering the control tower that was forbidden of access for anyone except the staff. He nodded at those wearing the same naval uniform as himself, as well as those wearing the army’s.

“If you’d done anything uncalled for, my underlings in the acrobatic flight would have seen it.” Amongst them, a man who stood on the side spoke to him. “They’re still flying.” With a screech resounding from his mechanical arm, the man who had talked pointed towards the sky.

"It's been a few years."

His appearance was different from when Dietfriet knew of him. One of his eyes was covered by an eyepatch, and a laceration was half-hidden by it. His hair was the color of dusk. His emerald green irises were as real gems. His profile, bordered on melancholy, littered with coldness. His tall body was clad in the purplish black army uniform of Leidenschaftlich, the seacoast country so famous for being a military nation. It was not the one that any soldier could wear. A golden badge attached to his cloak indicated the scale of his status.

Gilbert waved off Dietfriet's hand, which had rested on his shoulder.

"How cold. Just now, I met your tool."

For the two of them, it was obvious what "tool" referred to.

"I ain't lying. She chased after me. It doesn't look like she mistook me for you, though. Be careful. You're pretending to be dead, right? Why are you doing things in such a complicated way...?"

"Brother, about Violet..."

"I didn't tell her anything." Dietfriet uttered no lie. "It seems she was at loss after you were gone. I just told her something as her former Lord: to live as much as she could and then die."

Due to him not having affirmed anything, Violet Evergarden had gone back home with the hope she that had been embracing reassured. He did not intend to reveal that to his younger brother.

"This is your wish, right? It's probably not the same... for that thing. Before I realized, someone was taking her away. Since he had conspicuous red hair, it must have been that colleague of yours from your military school days, right? He must have thought I was gonna kill her. Haha, as if I could manage. If I were able to kill her, I already would have... Hey, Gil. You wouldn't possibly say that you like that monster, would you? You've raised it into a pretty fine woman, but you know what's inside. Stop that."

"It doesn't concern you."

"It does. You're important. You're my little brother."

“This is between me and Violet. It doesn’t concern... anyone else. The one who pushed everything onto that ‘important little brother’ was you, wasn’t it? Whatever I, who was left behind...” Gilbert’s emerald orbs slanted. The sky was so bright that watching it caused his eyes to ache. However, he did not close them. “...am betting my whole life to protect is my business. I am carving my own position for that. Right now, my reason to live isn’t for the sake of aiming for even higher-ranking prestige in the army, or for cleaning up after you in the Bougainvillea household. It’s for her. If you ever do anything, I will crush you with all I have. That’s what my weapons are for. This won’t change even if my opponent is you, Brother.”

Seeing how much his younger brother, whom he was meeting for the first in a long time, had changed, Dietfriet observed the sky as if it were too dazzling. “You’re... not a little kid anymore, huh.” He balled a fist and attempted to punch Gilbert on the shoulder.

Gilbert accepted it. He grabbed ahold of the other’s hand firmly. Dietfriet endured the throbbing in his hand and wrapped it over Gilbert’s. It was almost as when they held hands in their childhood.

“Hey, I may be a shitty brother to you, but... I love you.”

The brothers told each other secrets. In low voices, so that no one else would hear.

“I know.”

Within the Bougainvillea house, they had always talked in such way. In order to not be scolded, they would only whisper, just the two of them.

“You really... do understand, huh. Even like this, I love you... with all my might. I love you, Gilbert... I... wonder why... I just... can’t properly convey this to the people I’m really fond of.”

“I know, Brother.”

As the veil of night descended, the people who had put off the Aeronautical Exhibition relied on the moonlight and the lamps of their rooms to read the words of encouragement sent to them by someone unknown. Were their own letters inspiring anyone? With their thoughts running wild, they thoroughly

reflected on that day. It might have been a good one for some. It might have not for others. Whichever it was, the kindness given to them unconditionally reduced the loneliness of a long night and the anxiety towards the following morning, bestowing them with a tiny bit of hope.

Standing alone by the windowsill, Violet attempted opening the single envelope that she had brought with her from the Flying Letters after having been taken back to the Evergarden mansion.

“Yes.”

All it contained were the words “cheer up”, with a handwriting that seemed to be of a child.

Dawn broke equally to everyone. No matter who they were.

The morning was merely a small part of a whole day. However, it was also an important moment in which people’s conduct would be demarcated. The color of the sky they would see, the scent of the air, whether they had eaten, how much they had slept the day before – each little element was definite for their choices and actually dictated their fates. Without knowing that much, people would afterwards regret the decisions they had made casually. After all, dawn broke equally to everyone, but that applied solely to the living.

Once something began, the only thing left to do was move on towards the end.

Chapter 13: Violet Evergarden

The railway that parted from the southern maritime country Leidenschaftlich finally being extended to northern nations was something quite recent.

Public means of transportation were rather useful for traveling around a wide continent, yet the trains across the mainland contributed greatly not only to each person but also to society in terms of logistics. It could be said that the current results had been achieved due to the North-South feud of the Continental War being terminated on a superficial basis.

The information that a ceremony would be held for the departure of the intercontinental train spread quickly in the city of Leiden, and people rushed in pursue of tickets for the first trip. On the following day, the morning newspaper prior to the departure ceremony – which was completely taken over by the latter – was made to be delivered not only throughout Leidenschaftlich but also to the neighbor countries.

Although it was a trivial article for those who were not interested in the subject, the appearance of a single woman amongst the published photographs of people seeking the tickets instigated, for better or worse, a surreptitious feeling in those who knew her. Lux Sibyl, who would be at the CH Postal Service first-thing in the morning, smiled proudly upon spotting the figure of her beautiful friend. A novelist who quietly recited words in the middle of the mountains was in high spirits as though he had found a treasure amidst the article's photos, and laid it as decoration on his cutouts wall. A young astronomer on the way of a journey bought two more copies of the same newspaper after a moment of astonishment, and Cattleya, who was on an amanuensis duty at a place far away from the office, asked her male client, with the newspaper at hand, who the cutest one was between herself and the woman displayed in it. Someone who had not seen her face for a long time surrendered himself to tracing it with his fingertips.

It was only a picture, but on the morning of that day, a premonition that something special was about to begin was engraved remarkably in the minds of those who had been involved with Violet Evergarden.

The departure ceremony was held in the Leidenschaftlich Station at two o'clock in the afternoon, and at three o'clock, after the passengers had come aboard the intercontinental train, it left the city by the end of the formalities. Children riding a train for the first time leaned their bodies forward over the windows and praised the scenery, proudly boasting to each other about the good fortune of managing to entrain the first expedition. Those using it for work-related transferences were satisfied with the careful customer service and safe driving, and those who had booked the sleeper cars had their hearts stolen by the comfort as their bodies immediately embraced the drowsiness.

The operation went on without a hitch in general. Minor troubles were witnessed, such as the employees in charge of transporting baggage sending a passenger's luggage to the wrong room, or a customer from one of the dining cars who had ordered a dish without onions finding a small piece of onion in it and getting angry, but they were nothing that could be considered important.

The passing scenery outside the windows was gradually dyed in madder red, and just an hour after the departure, the world began to be surrounded by signs of the night. Once every hour, the train was required to be refilled with water.

"We will soon temporarily stop at the water supply point, so please sit down as the train will shake." The porter advised the customers of each car.

As people were completely fascinated with the tour, they did not attempt to impede those who remained on their feet without any intention of sitting down. There were also many who observed the scenery while sipping alcoholic drinks. Those in a good mood did not listen to what others said.

The porter, who had given the warning, smiled while thinking along the lines of "what troublesome patrons" as he gently walked next to said passengers and asked them to take their seats.

It was an exceptionally wonderful voyage. Nobody imagined any tragedies would happen. Nor did anyone find the behavior of those individuals suspicious. The fact that they stuck a knife to the porter's neck and slit it went unnoticed as

well.

That day was genuinely supposed to be a marvelous one for several people.

At two quarters past four o'clock, under the thick clouds spreading in an autumn sky, a corpse was discarded on the railroad track as if it were dirt. It rolled onto the ground, and, before the crows could greedily devour it, it was found by the owner of a nearby meadow, who happened to be passing by. Much like rain pouring onto the surface of a lake, such thing hinted the extent of some sort of big incident. The first drop was the dead body. One, two more drops fell from the sky, which marked the discovery of a problem that was now progressively growing.

The abnormal demeanor of the intercontinental train, which had originally been supposed to make stops yet was passing every station while keeping the passengers on board, caught quite a bit of attention, and at some point, the army was mobilized. First came a report from employees and civilians from one of the stations that were passed by, and the message was relayed to the military police.

The military police based itself mainly on law enforcement duty to protect the safety of the citizens' everyday lives, and was a separate entity from the army, despite having the word "military" in its name. By the time the military police had arrived at the Leidenschaftlich Army Ministry, a reinforce request for the situation had been issued from the Leidenschaftlich National Railway as well.

The headquarters of the Leidenschaftlich Army Ministry were, in one word, a fort. For a mere building, it had a hardly describable architecture. Firstly, there was a castle tower-like construction that housed the Army Ministry, with double stonewalls surrounding it. There was a dry moat outside of the walls, and the trees and shrubs beyond said moat had been entirely cut down in order to open the view. There was no place for foes to hide in case of invasions. The structure already seemed to intimidate with an unsaid "if you want to defeat me, come try".

Being able to bask in a constitution that was so well-attuned to hostility was likely a proof that its soldiers had overcome numerous aggressive wars. In such setting, by courtesy of the country's system, the reinforcement request project,

“Case of the Intercontinental Train’s Hijacking”, was set to be launched at the Army Ministry on an early stage, but the recruited officers were not yet aware of the extent of the chaotic rain’s dispersion.

At twenty minutes past five o’clock of that day, in one of the Army Ministry’s rooms, Gilbert Bougainvillea was discussing the course of action of Leidenschaftlich’s army’s Special Offense Force, which he used to lead.

“Disbanding would be reasonable, but if it is to be handed over, I would like to be the one to choose the personnel.”

Gilbert Bougainvillea, who used to be a major of Leidenschaftlich’s army, had equitably served as lieutenant-colonel, and, in recognition of the achievements in the Great War from the Special Offense Force of Leidenschaftlich’s army, then led by himself, yet another position promotion was acknowledged and he was allowed to wear the rank insignia of colonel. After becoming a colonel, operating inside the Army Ministry was basically his main task. The way it was, his troop had been on march both inside and outside of the country, since the circumstances had required post-war armed interventions, yet it was left afloat as a result of his successive career.

“It’s my honest opinion that disbanding it is regrettable. There are members who want to resign from it due to being promoted, but even with those posts vacant, it has a high level of excellence. To the point it can very well work as an independent unit. Well, the higher-ups probably won’t allow that so easily... since they might think of it as your private soldiers.” A bluish black-haired man agreed with Gilbert’s words. “Laurus Schwartzman” was written in the nameplate on his desk.

Gilbert nodded at the outlook of the person who had the same status of colonel as himself but used to be in the position of his superior in the past. “Eventually, we could create this independent unit... From the viewpoint of those who are managing it, a unit that has too much freedom is dangerous, but it spends great efforts when there are big emergencies. However, if we are told that there have been none of those until now, we will not be granted consent. Therefore, I would like to leave a foundation ready for the sake of this occurrence... and, if I am to pass it down to someone else, I want a person who

puts everyone's individual qualities into consideration to take over it. The members were mostly polished by being brought into my personal care, after all."

"Who do you intend to appoint as successor?"

"Idris. He's fit for being commander."

"Isn't he a fellow without education or supporters? It's almost like me. Won't you recommend someone from the Bougainvillea lineage? There ought to be people in the army who are from your branch families."

"Colonel Laurus... you recommended me because you dislike faction-based nominations, yet now you're telling me to nominate a Bougainvillea? Idris is clever even without education. He's also vastly ambitious. As for supporters... I can become one."

"I was just teasing; don't get so angry." At Gilbert's low voice tone, Laurus soon laughed and apologized. As he became older, Gilbert had come to possess a presence that he did not in his younger days.

"Well, then, regarding the placement of a successor in my troops... I will count with your assistance for the necessary arrangements."

"And my recompense will be...?"

"My little sister has said she wants to ride a horse with you in our next outing."

Laurus showed a pleased reaction and Gilbert sighed a little, his shoulders slumping as if a weight had fallen upon them.

Gilbert's position in the army appeared stable, but it was not so in reality. Although there were people who supported him simply for being a Bougainvillea, there were also those who attempted to ostracize him for it. Gilbert had reached a period in which he would have to decide whom he would take as his allies. Jealousy and corruption always rose wherever there was influence. Gradually gathering into his hands those people who were so hard for him to become like and securing them tightly under his arms was something necessary for Gilbert as of late.

Laurus was someone whose back he had used to observe as if chasing after it when he had joined the army, and now Gilbert was finally side-by-side with him. There were very few who could manage through the promotion from colonel to brigadier-general and from brigadier-general to major-general. As Laurus himself did not display interest in being promoted, Gilbert believed he would not go above being a colonel. His origins, unlike Gilbert's, did not leave him in an advantageous condition for disputing success, either.

"This is up to the two of you, but please don't ever upset my sister, since she deeply cherishes you. Promise me."

"I know she does. She confessed her love for a guy like me, after all. I intend to be with her even in my grave."

He displayed no signs of looking for competition and his nature could be trusted. For Gilbert to think he could leave his sister to the latter's care, he had to be a commendable individual.

Upon easing the wrinkles between his brows with the fingertips of his left arm, which had become a prosthetic, Gilbert took in his hand a newspaper unrelated to work that was lying on the desk. Ever since he had read it in the morning after waking up, he had carried it around with him while on-duty. He subconsciously looked at the part of it that had photos of the intercontinental train.

"You've... been reading that since morning, huh. You like trains?"

"If there comes a chance to get on a tour ride, I want to try it." With gestures that could not be perceived as unnatural, he folded the side with the pictures and put the newspaper down.

The two men had been in a situation in which even Laurus had come to question why Gilbert had abandoned the Warrior Maiden of Leidenschaftlich's army in the aftermath of the Great War, and therefore, he did not wish to get into the topic. As they chatted about trivial everyday matters, someone knocked on the door.

"Colonel Schwartzman... ah, Colonel Bougainvillea, you're here in a good timing. We are having an emergency meeting. A big incident has happened. The case has been established at the countermeasures headquarters, so please

come quickly. Right now, we are summoning all the personnel from the task force.”

Being told so by the administrative official, the two looked at each other's faces and stood up at the same time.

Those who gathered at the headquarters, in which a roundtable was prepared, were mainly colonels. The occurring incident would be explained by the major-general beforehand.

“First and foremost, at two in the afternoon, a departure ceremony was held in honor of the intercontinental train, and one hour later, the passengers came on board and it left the station. It passed by Attaccare, which was one of its stop stations, and proceeded just like that. It was also at this time that a corpse was thrown off in the vicinity of Attaccare. The body was found and reported by a farmer of that neighborhood. According to the information of the Leidenschaftlich’s National Railway, the train is currently stopping at the Rauschend station, which is one of the water supply points. A demand for reward in exchange for the passengers was issued to Leidenschaftlich through the station’s staff.” While everyone paid attention to him, the major-general said bitingly, “The enemy is telling us to release a political felon who is being kept in the Altair Prison. He’s a criminal from one of the countries that had formed an alliance in the previous war, Rohand. After the proclamation of their defeat, he blackmailed his motherland’s leaders into revoking the announcement, caused an internal conflict and was arrested. The ones responsible for this hijacking incident are maybe his guard dogs, certainly his comrades. Meaning the main offenders of this case are people who still don’t want to acknowledge that they lost the war.”

A feeling of tension ran through the place as the major-general recognized the other party as an ‘enemy’. In Leidenschaftlich, ‘enemies’ brought harm to the whole nation. They would all become targets of elimination, and most of them counted with military power as their means of control, unwilling to solve anything with dialogue.

“To top it off, the enemies hope to migrate to their country. The train is headed to the northernmost port city of the continent. They have a ship

prepared there as well. It seems they expect everything to go flawlessly..." The major-general punched the north part of the map laid on the roundtable.

The people seated at the roundtable did not move even upon being startled, and their line of sight was fixed on the major-general. They accepted the anger emanating from him.

"We... we of Leidenschaftlich's army... exist for the sake of defending our people and territory from foreign threats. To allow something like this after ending a war is a disgrace to Leidenschaftlich's name. But this is not just a matter of honor. There have already been casualties. This is quite an obvious statement, but it's clear that our country's people will be taken throughout this trip until the migration succeeds. There are surely women and children who can't fight back in that midst. It's not hard to imagine what they'll go through. We must prevent this no matter what. The 'enemy' is moving. The problem is how to take the reins. We shall form a strategy considering the hypothesis of even worst-case scenarios. From this point on, I give everyone, regardless of them being upper or lower ranks, permission for voicing suggestions."

At the major-general's words, everyone started composing tactics while observing the map. The train was in motion. If they were to strike it, their only option would be invading it. Attacking from the outside would compromise the lives of the passengers inside. The opinion that there was no choice but stand in wait for it at one of the water supply points and ambush it all at once was settled down no matter what. But the enemy would probably anticipate that much. The concern that a hostage could be killed for display just so the criminals' passage would be permitted was enunciated, as well as the fact the passengers would be in tantalizing circumstances, as they would not be able to do anything until the train stopped at the water supply point. They sought for urgent contact.

The debate became heated. Amidst it, only Gilbert was reticent as he paled in silence. His ears registered everyone's exchanges. He was also formulating in his head what proposals he should verbalize, as doing so might be necessary. However, a single fact dominated his entire body and halted its outward functions.

—*Violet is on board.*

There was no way he could have mistaken her figure as he spotted her in a photography of people trying to buy tickets for the first trip. It was extremely natural for an Auto-Memories Doll traveling around the world to rely on trains. Meaning there would be no one else to be aboard the intercontinental train in her stead.

—*If I called Hodgins, would he answer?*

He had judged Gilbert for leaving Violet without a trace. In their last conversation, he had said he would be cutting their ties until Gilbert reconsidered it.

“Gilbert...? You’re... quiet, but don’t you have any ideas?”

As Laurus spoke to him from the side, Gilbert turned towards his direction. He was probably making a face that he normally would not. Laurus leaned back with a start.

The major-general promptly noticed it. “What’s wrong, Laurus? Don’t hold back in giving your suggestion.”

“No... I... right, I agree with the ambush at the water supply point. It will be off-the-cuff from the garrison on the railway, but I think we can’t do anything other than prepare the troops and stand in wait... I believe that organizing a plan and personnel that can back us up during a seizure battle after the waiting is most crucial. The fact that stopping at the water supply points is mandatory for the train is its trait, after all.” Once Laurus had uttered his proposition, perhaps due to thinking Gilbert was feeling sick, he asked the latter in a low tone, “You okay?”

Gilbert nodded without saying anything. As the major-general requested his opinion as well, Gilbert settled for saying, “I approve the flow of the current situation’s discussion.”

Since he was worried about Violet’s and the passengers’ safety, Gilbert favored the course of action of a short-term decisive battle.

—*Still, it is only a matter of time for an antagonistic view to manifest.* Just as he thought so, what Gilbert dreaded soon became a reality.

“I sense an incongruence in this trend. To ensure the success of our scheme,

wouldn't it be better to formulate a plan for us to take control of the train at the last station in that northern port city?" After Laurus and Gilbert had expressed their valuations, a colonel who had been solely observing, much like Gilbert until that point, raised his voice.

"Ahmar, when you object, you have to explain your plan in detail." The major-general urged colonel Ahmar to speak further.

Laurus had an obviously unamused face on. Bearded and enormous, the man named Ahmar was on par with him, but the two of them were like cats and dogs. The people present were aware that the fact Ahmar had not voiced his own suggestions until then was due to wanting to oppose Laurus. The air became heavier.

"This opinion was given just a bit ago, but if we target them at the water supply point and end up letting them pass, the number of deaths would go up, right? The perpetrators would kill hostages for revenge, and their demands towards us would be bound to increase. In that meantime, I can already see that they would use a ransom for their requisitions. If that will be the case, making the other party think that things will proceed as they requested and then taking them down at once is a better idea. I'm sorry for regressing the discussion, but if this is an emergency, I believe we should choose an assured plan."

"No! If you think about the citizens, we should act immediately! How do you think the people in that train are feeling right now? Are you saying that while knowing how long it takes to reach the last station?! Their families, too, want the army to do something as soon as possible!"

"Laurus, you always show off your principles with emotion-oriented arguments, but that's unnecessary for a strategy. Results are everything, and we can elaborate the process later on. Are you giving those suggestions by picturing the aftermath of the aftermath? There have already been casualties, and for the sake of causing no more of them, we've no choice other than have the passengers endure it."

The subject of the meeting was split into two sides: Laurus, who thought about the citizens' rescue before anything else, and Ahmar, who prioritized

bringing the situation under control.

Gilbert, who was silent beside Laurus, could even feel his restless heart sort out in the course of events. Rather than agitation, his impatience to do something about the direction that things were taking, which was not the one he wanted, was becoming stronger. Gilbert could not consent to Ahmar's methods.

It was difficult to imagine that Violet Evergarden would tamely ride all the way to the final station. She would likely take some sort of action. The fact that she was on board enthused not only great hopes but also a sense of unease.

—If she's on her own, it's evident that she will be reckless.

She was not the kind of young woman who would not use self-defense were she in a situation that required it. Gilbert had disciplined her that way.

—I must go for her aid. I must protect her. It's precisely because she's strong that she...

It would mean taking back his resolve of that day, in which he had shed tears while making the decision to part ways with her. Should she find out he was still alive, Violet would definitely attempt to become Gilbert's tool once more. That was his biggest fear.

—I don't want... to see the one I love acting as a tool ever again.

Gilbert asked himself – in the current circumstances, what was the man named Gilbert Bougainvillea most afraid of?

—Violet's death.

Gilbert asked himself – in the current circumstances, what did he wish for the most?

—Her safety.

Peeking into his heart's discords, what he had to do was crystal-clear.

—Is this... also fate?

Gilbert closed his eyes once. He evened his breathing. The face of the girl he had forsaken resurfaced in his mind. So did her appearance from that picture,

which showed she had grown up a good deal in the meantime that they had not seen each other.

He had spent many efforts until managing to take that seat. The next one he would aim for was the seat of major-general. The more he climbed up, the more he would be able to do in exchange of his free conduct being restricted.

At that moment, while such an incident was going on, he could feel God's guidance yet again. He had become distressed when worrying about Violet, but could clearly understand what he had to do upon reasoning calmly.

—*What are you living for? Don't get worked-up.*

Slowly, slowly, he opened his adhered eyelids.

—*I've chosen a path in which I'd be able to walk at times like these. The time has come. That is all.*

“May I... offer my suggestion?”

No wavering remained in his emerald green orbs. He stared at the major-general and everyone at the round table with his opened eyes. He knew what conduct he should take even without thinking about it.

“I have an idea.” His voice was neither too loud nor too low. “Firstly, about dispatching soldiers to the garrison located on the train's route... I agree with it. We simply must not let it go to the North. Should it, by any chance, reach the sea, the navy will be the one to deal with it. I will talk to my older brother, Dietfriet Bougainvillea. As the Major-General has said, we should move while keeping the worst possible scenario in mind.”

It was important to speak with a calm attitude.

“About the current problem of where the dispatched soldiers should engage, I am against a battle at the final station. Should the place turn into a battlefield, emotion-based issues with the northern side will be involved. Those people are heroes from the North's viewpoint. Showing them being purged in northern lands – their own home – would become a great display, but we should expect that it would instigate a shock big enough to cause an incident. Right now, they are showing a well-behaved attitude towards the Southeast regarding the release of their military forces, but they will definitely hold a grudge against

this."

"We shouldn't be discussing such a thing now!"

Gilbert responded level-headedly to Ahmar's angry roar, "The one who talked about picturing the aftermath of the aftermath, Colonel, was you."

"You... have some nerve to be using such rude words with me, given that you became a colonel just recently..."

"The Major-General stated from the very start that we should give our suggestions freely. Are you against the Major-General's decision?"

As their superior was cited, Ahmar refused to back off with a "no way", his face becoming bright red.

Just as Ahmar had done with Laurus, Gilbert laid out a protest, "Please allow me to continue explaining my idea. There is no guarantee that the damage is limited only to the passengers. It is necessary to evacuate all of the stations along the train's course and the citizens in their proximities as well. Paired to the ambush attack at the water supply point, I propose an infiltration plan by tailing them from the capitol Leiden." He stated loudly with a manner of speech that had a touch of composure and elegance.

People judged others mostly through vision and hearing. Taking such conduct would make them think, "what this man says is worth listening to".

"'Infiltration plan', you say? Will we make it in time if we start chasing them now?"

Gilbert retorted Ahmar's mockery without so much as raising a brow, "I will have the Nighthawks take flight."

"Even if the train is on a stop now, it will eventually move!"

The one who became emotional would lose.

"Even if it does, it will stop again. To replenish water. If the infiltration turns out successful, it will greatly increase the accomplishment rate of the estimated suppression at the water supply point. Rescuing the passengers is a top priority. The more time this hijacking case takes, the more the death toll will rise. Both the criminals' side and the victims' side are losing their sanity. You shall know

whether or not the Nighthawks will make it in time if you leave it to me. Let us mobilize the Leidenschaftlich Special Offense Force. Of course, I will be the one in command."

There was a stir. He examined the major-general's complexion, but the latter did not find fault in his proposal.

Not letting the flow slip away from him, Gilbert resumed speaking, "Just a while ago, there was a remark about how we must prepare personnel specific for this sort of situation, but everyone, have you forgotten? The Leidenschaftlich Special Offense Force has been widely active as a raid unit since wartime. They clearly have the role disposition necessary for the process of an infiltration with a small number of people. If we are told to move now, we can act immediately. Although there may be opinions that I should not be the one commanding on-site given my rank, the troops are still in my care, and my status is of recently-nominated colonel. I shall prove my effectiveness. Please think of me as a board piece. A board piece that will mobilize the navy, and, if everything goes well, fulfill the infiltration which will bring a quick resolution to this. If my troops fail, the ones lying in wait will be the dispatched soldiers of Leidenschaftlich's army. I find it extremely hard to believe that this incident merely stems from the North's revenge. There must be... something else happening behind the scenes. There is not only one trap. I feel that... they are seeking for a devastating win, for which they have yet another scheme that we would not be able to crush along with the twofold and threefold traps they have laid out." After pausing once to swallow saliva, Gilbert inquired, "Major-General, what do you say? I wish you would let me do it." He pleaded, yet the right to decide was not his. Maintaining his posture, he pleaded even more with his eyes and approach.

Gilbert was aware. From an early age, he had always understood how he should behave in front of whom whenever he was in the presence of others. Were he to make a mistake, admonition would come flying at him. That was the secret for triumph in order to live as a Bougainvillea. Depending on the attitudes he took, he knew what his opponent's outcome might be. Within the world he understood, he currently existed for the sake of the one and only person that he once did not know he loved.

"Well, give it a try. Demonstrate your abilities as a board piece."

"I will definitely show you satisfying results." While replying, Gilbert had already created a different strategy.

If there was something that could have been considered a brilliant day in the life of Samuel LaBeouf, it would be today. He had been elected head engineer of the frontal engine room of the first intercontinental train, which would remain in the country's history. One had to wonder how many kisses of joy he had planted on the polished, black car walls. He had boasted about it to his family and friends countless times. The people who knew of his efforts praised him sincerely and saw off the first service with a smile. Initially, Samuel had planned to spend his time humming a tune while journeying around the world as the Sun set, replaying that wonderful day in his head.

"The substitutes... still haven't arrived?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry...!"

It was exactly six hours and forty-three minutes into the evening. Samuel had a gun thrust at his neck from behind. The unmoving body of one of his colleague engineer and assistant lay at his feet, head hanging loosely. Said person, who had greeted and chatted with him on that very day, was now immobile. The train which tale had only just started and which name would be engraved in history had suddenly been hijacked and occupied by criminals.

—*Why... Why... did it come to this? What did I even do?*

When exposed to a cruel fate, people would mostly have similar thoughts. Firstly, they would bemoan their doom.

—*Where and what did I do wrong?*

Then, they would trace in their brains the way back to when they were struck by misfortune. The time in which the intercontinental train that Samuel had been supposed to drive had left the station of Leidenschaftlich's capitol city, Leiden, after the departure ceremony was over had been a while before dusk.

The intercontinental train, so-called "Femme Fatale", was a full thirteen-car train composed of Locomotive 1, 2 and 3, Single-Room Sleeping Car 1 and 2,

Simple Sleeping Car 1 and 2, Passenger Car 1 and 2, Panoramic Seats Car, Dining Car 1 and 2, and a freight car. In order to pull the other ten cars, each of the three locomotives had an engineer and engineer assistant, and with a steam whistle as sign, each locomotive would do a triple-heading to adjust its pace. Therefore, even if the driving staff were lacking by just one person, the operation would not go as desired.

Femme Fatale had been invaded by hijackers with weapons not even an hour after departing from Leidenschaftlich. The hijackers had scattered into each car upon the start of the operation, seizing the train from the freight car. In the process, the ones murdered were a porter from Simple Sleeping Car 1, one engineer from Locomotive 3 and Samuel's partners – a total of three assistants – from Locomotive 1.

Femme Fatale needed replenishment of water, which was its fuel, from the stop stations. Currently, parallel to the water supplying, a demand had been sent to Leidenschaftlich and the National Railway for replacements to the vacant engineer and assistant posts, and the substitutes were being awaited. The hijackers seemed to have made other demands to the government, but did not notify Samuel, who was merely one of the hostages, of such things.

They had a cloth bearing the national emblem of a certain northern country wrapped around their arms. What on Earth was their purpose? Was it to take revenge for their defeat? Did they have even more outrageous plans? Either way, it could be assumed that their group was full of people that behaved carelessly and did not take orders. After all, no matter how much they lacked knowledge of how trains worked, they wound up killing staff members for hindering the operation.

“Don’t worry. If you hadn’t listened to our instructions, it’d be a different story, but since you are a driver, we won’t kill you. This space is crammed. Don’t get too scared and wet your pants. It’d stink.” One of the hijackers said as if to calm Samuel down, perhaps due to his fearful form being unsightly.

“Hum, once the vacancy is supplemented... until what point am I supposed to drive...?”

“Go to the final stop with no changes in the course. What we demand of you

is to deliver us safely."

He had thought that saying anything would irritate them and earn him a violent response. Thus, he was a little surprised to be able to talk normally to them.

—They may be human beings just like me, but I can't bring myself to think of them as such.

From Samuel's viewpoint, they seemed like people from a completely different world.

There were obviously people other than Samuel LaBeouf wondering why things had turned out that way. Unlike Samuel, who had his life assured to some extent for being in the position of engineer, the ones in question were the frightened passengers, who had no idea of when they might be killed should they get on the hijackers' nerves.

Several hours had passed since the incident had started upon arrival at the water supply point. The number of criminals was not too big, but a few of them were monitoring the hostages by taking turns with one another. The information that an engineer and some assistants had put up a resistance and been slaughtered in the frontal engine room, and that replacement personnel was being awaited had not come down to them. The state of tension due to fear persisted for a long while, and the mental condition of the passengers was nearing its limit.

"Aah, really, why did this have to happen?" In the back of Dining Car 2, one of the customers – an elderly gentleman – lamented with his meal gone cold in front of him.

—At this point in time, I was supposed to be seeing my niece wearing her wedding dress and getting married in our hometown.

He had not expected that the train ride, which had begun with such a happy mood, would turn into something so horrid. The big incidents he would see in newspapers and hear about in rumors always took place far away from him, and therefore, he had never imagined that a disaster of similar proportion would actually occur.

He had not been directing his words at anyone in particular, but the woman sitting close to him reacted to them.

“What is an intercontinental train even meant to be...?”

Amidst such an overwrought scenario, a beautiful and refreshing voice echoed in his ears, “Just as the name says, it is a large-scale vehicle that makes connections through a railroad that goes from one end to the other of the continent, and transports anything, from goods to people. It grants accessibility and profit to many. However, trains cannot run if there is no railway. To build railways, the ground must be shaved off. Even if there are flowerbeds or homes on said ground, whatever might be on the way is forcefully removed and their existence is eliminated.” It belonged to an eccentric, attractive woman who only mutely watched the change of colors in the sky without letting out a single scream ever since the car had been taken control of by the hijacker group. As though a machinery or something of the sort was embedded in her head, she talked on smoothly, “In order to build this railroad, it seems that a northern castle, which used to be a cultural monument, was demolished. Moreover, I have heard that operators from the North, the losing side, have suffered profoundly from overwork due to low-wage labor. Paths are opened with explosives so that we can get through mountains. The number of explosion accidents that happened in the process was not small.” The woman’s blue eyes observed the northern country emblem wrapped around the arm of a hijacker that held onto his weapon.

“That can’t be. You shouldn’t tell lies. Such a thing was... not in the newspapers, was it?”

Few were the people who would not become uncomfortable upon hearing that the state or nation they belonged to was the evil side. As the gentleman spoke a little indignantly, the woman – Violet Evergarden – spouted forth, “It is not a very well-known story. I, too, heard it by coincidence when I was traveling. I have been to everywhere, after all. Most likely, it can be presumed that this was their impetus... but if that were the case, taking the chance of destroying this train car and killing us should have been the main goal. They have murdered crew members, but seem to regard the lives of us passengers as considerably important. There... might be some other purpose...”

The gentleman was shaken at such a frail-looking girl uttering the word "murdered". "By that, you mean...?"

"Who knows? Since they have taken us as hostages... it is reasonable to believe that they are making demands to the government."

The gentleman was not convinced of Violet's speech, yet was impressed by her intelligent guess.

—*Just... what exactly does this girl do for a living?*

She was a mysterious young woman who had an appearance akin to one of those dolls that small children would carry around. The fear that had been enveloping him settled down a little due to his curiosity regarding her.

"Still, that has nothing to do with us. I simply... wanted to attend the wedding of my distant niece."

"Yes. However," Violet continued, "Our circumstances also do not matter to them. Each side persisting on their convictions is what wars are about. This place can already be considered a battlefield."

The world, which had been covered by dusk, morphed into evening. The soft glow of the lanterns hanging in the car produced a gentle light that significantly contrasted with such an edgy situation. Blue eyes stared at the state of the water supply procedures outside, the car's lamps and the men yelling at a few passengers that had been taken hostage, respectively.

"I should soon... get going."

It was then that the gentleman finally noticed. She was not merely observing the situation in silence. She had been aiming for some sort of opening.

"Hey, you, I don't know what you intend to do, but it's better to stop..."

"It is completely dark outside. This window is rather large, is it not?"

The gentleman was confused at the remarks that did not make sense.

"Sir, if I may ask, do you smoke cigarettes or cigars?"

"Y-Yes."

"Do you have matches?"

“In my right pocket...”

“Please allow me to borrow just one of them later.” Saying nothing but that, Violet promptly stood up. She slowly raised a hand to her hair’s bundle of braids.

The gentleman could see that her hand grasped a thinly-sharpened silver stick. It was one of her hidden devices, which could be used in both close and long-range combat, but from an ordinary person’s view, it could be perceived as nothing but a thick needle.

However, one of the criminals held Violet at gunpoint as she had started acting odd. “Hey, what are you doing?! Hands up!”

“Understood.” She raised her arms, just as she was told.

The next instant, only the lanterns of the car abruptly burst and the lights went out. The screams of the passengers mingled with the hijackers’ angry voices. But there were no gunshots. The sounds of something striking and of breaking glass continued. Then, it became completely quiet. Everyone was enveloped in bewilderment at the silence that met them amidst the pitch darkness.

What had happened to the hijackers? What had been made of the girl who had suddenly stood up? What on Earth was going on in that car at that moment? While the passengers’ minds were filled with questions, fire was lit back within one of the shattered lanterns. A beautiful woman holding a match emerged from the dark like a spirit. With an index finger against her lips, she whispered a “shh”. The woman stood out vividly against the colors of the night. All the passengers who took notice of her fell silent under compulsion.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. I am a traveler. Everyone, I am aware that you must be tired. Please wait a little bit longer. I will now take control... of the guards outside and the freight car.” Saying no more than that, Violet blew out the match’s fire with a whiff.

The gentleman realized then that a match had been taken from his breast pocket without his notice.

Within that world of darkness, only noises began to echo yet again as one of

the left-side windows was opened and someone landed outside. The sounds of gravel being stepped on and of someone running ensued. After a short while, a man's groan could be heard. A few seconds later, there was a rustle of something heavy being dragged.

The passengers shuddered, astonished with the unexpected turn of events. They then heard a treading over the gravel once more. It was a nimble pacing, coming close to the car. The footsteps of the unseen person fueled the sense of uneasiness in those who had been immersed in fear for a long time span.

"Excuse me."

"Hih!" The gentleman yelped curtly as the window was casually knocked from outside.

Violet stood in the outer world, where one could rely solely on moonshine, with the moonlight against her back.

"Everyone, make sure to remain quiet. Please escape before the people from the other cars come to attack this one."

Doll-like clothes, doll-like features. The hints of her humanity were dim in everything about her.

"Do lend a hand to women, elders and children. Please follow along the railway and walk in the opposite direction of the ride. It will most likely take time, but if you go to the nearest station, the military police will definitely grant you protection. It is not a good idea to stay at this station. People who seemed to be station's staff were conversing amicably with the guards, so there must be other entities participating in this takeover."

One could tell without directly seeing her fight. She was not an ordinary person.

People started to climb onto the window and come down in a surge.

"What about you? Will not you come with us?" The gentleman asked the enigmatic woman whom he was curious about once he set his foot on the ground.

Violet shook her head. "I have something to do here. An incident such as this

one is a first ever since the war ended. Most likely, Leidenschaftlich's army will make its move to deal with this strife. It is exceedingly difficult to stop a train... which is like a box with people inside, without attacking from the outside. If the inside is emptied, there will be no need for hesitation. It is clear that a battle will commence at one of the next stop stations. Until then, I have to do what I can..."

"That... isn't something for you to do, right? Let's all run away together."

"No..."

Her blue eyes were staring down at the gentleman in front of her, but her consciousness lay elsewhere.

"No, it is something I must do. This is... This is... for the sake of someone whom I wish to become the strength of, even if indirectly."

She was looking at Gilbert Bougainvillea, who was, somewhere far in the distance, surely spending efforts on the rescue of the citizens.

"Fortunately, I was going to arrive at the place where that I was heading to one day earlier than planned. I happened to use this train by coincidence, but there are other means of transportation. If I am still able to contact my head office today, they should be able to prepare a substitute for my duties... This is a rather big incident, so my company's president might have already anticipated this situation and arranged a replacement. That is my only matter of concern."

"You should be concerned about your own body rather than about things like that. It's dangerous... Aren't you just a young girl?"

"Worry not. The night has deepened, so I believe I can take control of this with the least possible damage."

"Control', you say..."

"Take control" were the words that she had spewed a while before as well. It was neither "put up a resistance" nor "seize". The standpoint she spoke of was different. She was planning to force the battle into surrender. That beautiful woman did not seem fearful or nervous in the slightest of being outnumbered.

--I have a feeling... that this is not quite having confidence.

All of her actions appeared to the gentleman as an automatic mechanism.

“Aren’t you scared?”

“I am not.” Her attitude was of someone unbothered by the fact that she was about to pick a fight with hijackers.

The train soon started moving.

The gentleman thanked her for saving everyone as she climbed back in and asked lastly, “You, what’s your name?”

Violet’s expression grew even more attractive than before while she placed an index finger against her lips without saying anything. As the train was gone, the gentleman was unable to hear her name.

Back at six hours and twenty-seven minutes, Gilbert had sent out an emergency convocation to his own troops, assembling them at a runway where Nighthawks took flight. All were waiting at a standby place near said runway for the transmission of the operation’s contents, the arming of the troops and the adjustment of the Nighthawk planes to be finalized. He had decided to make use of that time and contact the two men he needed to speak with.

“We are connected to the Leidenschaftlich Navy Ministry.”

“Sorry about that. I’ll borrow this as it is. I’m counting on you to keep people away for now.”

The person from the communication room, whom Gilbert had requested beforehand to make a call to his brother, conceded him the seat.

His brother’s voice could soon be heard. “Gil, you had a favor to ask your great older brother?”

It was the tone of someone feigning displeasure, Gilbert thought.

Although Dietfriet would make requests to Gilbert, the opposite usually did not happen. Whenever he did ask for anything, his brother would take a stance of annoyance, but never refused him. He probably felt indebted to Gilbert for the treatment that he had been giving the latter so far.

“Yeah, Brother. I do have a favor.”

There was no way the older one would be unhappy that his younger brother was relying on him.

Gilbert had been able to declare in the meeting that the navy would be mobilized since his appeals' chances of success were visible. The circumstances seemed to have been transmitted to the Navy Ministry as well, and so, a request for a battleship to be dispatched and prevent the migration from the port capitol of the North was officially issued.

Even though both were national organizations, Leidenschaftlich's army and navy were separate entities that shared the military budget. A mediator was needed for one to acquire the other's cooperation, or else, it was quite difficult to do so whenever there was no great gain for either. With the passage of time, the fact that Dietfriet had betrayed the Bougainvillea – a family that had joined the army for generations – and enlisted into the navy had been turning into an asset for the two brothers. Just as Gilbert, Dietfriet had carved a position for himself that enabled him to move his troops to a large extent.

"Well, then, I will definitely pay you back for this one day."

"Bring drinks and celebrate my birthday with me when it comes. That'd be enough."

"If it's something like this, I'd do it even without it serving as repayment." Gilbert replied and was about to hang up, but his fingertips, which had stretched towards the communication equipment, halted at the next words from Dietfriet.

"That's right... just one more thing. The reason you're so desperate is because of 'that', isn't it? I saw the newspaper. I ended up spotting 'that' in it even without wanting to. Has 'it' come to see you? 'It' discovered that you survived, right? I was curious as to what happened afterwards. Did you make 'it' yours?"

"Hah?" It was common since their childhood for his brother to prank him, and so, Gilbert thought that had been tasteless witticism at first. "Stop with the bad jokes at a time like this, Brother. Violet doesn't know of my survival."

Silence.

"Brother?"

"It wasn't a joke. I see... I was sure 'it' was gonna go see you as soon as possible, but I was wrong, huh? So 'it' is laying low because of this situation... Since you're so nice, you stayed away in order to give 'it' a peaceful life, so you're sure to be worrying that 'it' might find out about you because of this emergency rescue plan. Don't fret. 'It' already knows."

"What... What are you saying...?" Cold sweat slowly trailed down his back. "There's... no way she would." His voice was faltering.

"But it seems so. Last time I saw you during the Flying Letters... I told you I had seen 'it', right? Back then, 'it' asked me... if you were alive. I gave an answer that neither affirmed nor denied anything. And so, 'it'... **she** became convinced. That you were alive, I mean."

Although Gilbert could not change what had already happened, he felt like saying "wait up". His vision went white. He was dizzy enough to be on the verge of throwing up. With a hand on his lips, he kept quiet.

—*Violet... knows?*

"Hey, Gil. You okay?"

He had heard in detail from Hodgins about how much his lie had afflicted and saddened her. If she had learned that he was alive, then Gilbert was nothing to Violet other than the Lord who had tossed her away without so much as praising her military deeds. There would be no helping it if she came to hate him.

"Why... did you do something so uncalled for...?!"

Intense wrath engulfed Gilbert's heart. He was close to venting, but the only outlet for his rage was his brother.

"Like I care. Don't involve me in your blind love mess. I didn't answer, but she was convinced of it. That's all."

"You think it's unrelated to you... Brother, you always... Just how am I supposed to face her...?!"

"The people closest to you are family, right? It looked like she had always been believing that you had lived. When she confirmed that you were, how can

I put it? Well, she had her eyes shining like an idiot. If she hasn't gone there to see you... that's right. There's only one thing I can think of. Since she's a tool, she's waiting for her Master to pick her back up. She's probably anticipating a moment when she'll be needed... 'cause she's dumb. It's a good opportunity, so go fetch her."

"Brother—!!"

"You were preparing yourself for the worst while making this emergency rescue plan, right? Be thankful to your older brother for giving you this push. Bye, Gil. Leave the sea to me. Next time we meet will be on my birthday... Love ya."

"Brother, wait!"

The line was turned off one-sidedly. Gilbert was mute out of great perplex.

Perhaps people were waiting for the conversation to end, as the door was knocked from outside the communication room. Someone from his troops handed him a baggage with the weapons and ammo that he had specified. The one who had brought the baggage was concerned about Gilbert's oozing distress, taking it merely as a glimpse of the intense negotiations with the navy, but in reality, that was not the case.

While checking the baggage's contents, Gilbert held firmly onto the gun. Should he shoot a bullet into his own head, his worries over everything he was shouldering would certainly be gone, but he could not do so.

He then contacted Leidenschaftlich's CH Postal Service. A girl with a young-sounding voice answered the phone, but informed him that they were on temporary closing for the day. It seemed that they already knew about the hijacking incident.

"Please announce... that I called to offer help in the hijacking case of the intercontinental train. One of your members is in it, right? If you just say that I am from the Leidenschaftlich army, he should be able to know who it is..."

He could faintly hear a state of agitation on the other side of the line. It was a shout from his old friend, followed by the thud of something like a chair being knocked over as someone stood up, rustles of falling paperwork, and finally, he

was able to catch sounds of breathing.

“Gilbert! You... Where have you been and doing what?!” A voice clearly coated in anger echoed in his ears stridently. Regardless, Gilbert wound up feeling joy. It had truly been a long time since he had last talked to Claudia Hodgins.

“I heard just a bit ago from the secretary that you had contacted the army. Sorry. I was in a meeting.”

“Don’t go having meetings while one of my employees is in major trouble! You... know what’s up, don’t you? The army is making its move, right? In the hijacking case of the intercontinental train, I mean! She is... She is...”

“I am aware. Violet is on board, isn’t she? There was a photo of her in the newspaper.”

Hodgins was dumbfounded at Gilbert’s casual response and immediately retorted, “Don’t talk so calmly!” Losing his composure even more, he started making odd claims, “I am the way I am, and you were supposed to be like me too. You were supposed to be like that all along.”

—*He’s sentimental, and a boisterous guy.*

Gilbert ended up laughing. He felt embarrassed of how much he had longed for that noisy friend of his in the meantime they had not talked to one another. Not letting it show that he was just as anxious as the latter, he replied with words that were not solely his vanity, but also merged with his true sentiments, “As if I can afford to lose my mind. During times of crisis, it’s my duty to come up with means of protecting the citizens.”

“Does Little Violet... count as one of those citizens?”

“Obviously.”

“Are you mad... that I let Little Violet get in danger even though you entrusted her to me?”

Gilbert was sincerely surprised to be asked something completely different. “What are you saying? I’m grateful to you. I wouldn’t have entrusted her... to anyone else. You’re a man with sense of responsibility, so I left her to you. But

that has nothing to do with what is happening now.”

“I don’t think so.”

Gilbert realized what Hodgins was talking about as if he had grasped the matter with his hands. Even though he was not at fault, blaming himself while wondering what else he could have done was a trait of his best friend’s personality.

“Hodgins.”

“What?”

“You’re my number one friend.”

“What’s with that, out of the blue...?”

“Hodgins. A friend like you... won’t show up before me ever again. You’re that important, even if you don’t want to be. I’m the same to you, aren’t I? That’s why... I had thought you were taking my sins lightly. You asked me why I had let go of Violet and told me to come see her, right? And said I shouldn’t call you unless I reconsidered it.”

“I did. I definitely did.”

“I... I keenly felt that I was the last person she should see, so I let her go. When we first met, I had believed it was best for me to watch over her while keeping her at arm distance, but that was a façade, and in the end, I used her as a tool.”

“But that... under those circumstances, there was no helping it. I would have done the same.”

“Is that really so? I... don’t think you would. How is she now, the Violet that you guided and raised? If I... hadn’t made the wrong choice... if I hadn’t raised her by my side, she would have grown up without knowing the battlefield. The current Violet is how she was originally supposed to be. That’s why it’s not your fault if something like this happens in the process. For starters, this was an accident.”

“If you’re gonna say that, I can shoot it right back at ya. Don’t make it seem like Little Violet fighting alongside you in the war was something bad. That’s

blasphemy against every soldier we lived with in that period. The problem was how you would have guided her after that. And it was then I got angry, because you were prioritizing only your own feelings and not thinking about Little Violet. But, listen! I'll cease fire temporarily. Now isn't the time to be on break-up. We're both her guardians. Let's save her." His tone was determined and seemed to deliver the heated, glaring gaze of his greyish blue orbs even through the communication equipment.

"I agree with that... For her sake, anything I can do... In order to keep her away from the army, I have done several preparations to prevent her return. Personal connections, merits... I devoted myself for everything to be the utmost and very best. I'm in the middle of that even at the moment. If it's to protect Violet, I won't nitpick methods."

"So, you're gonna put up a cool pose like, 'whatever is not for her sake... shall be excluded, even should that be myself' and protect her from the shadows?"

"Yeah, that's right."

By the looks of it, Hodgins also did not seem to know the truth. That meant Violet really had concluded on her own that Gilbert had survived, and, as Dietfriet had said, was simply waiting for him. For her Master to come retrieve her.

"But I wonder about that... Soon, the lie I pinned into her might be busted. There's a high chance I'll come in contact with Violet."

After a brief silence, Hodgins's request for repetition in the form of a "Haah!?" resounded loudly. He finally took notice of turbine sounds coming from behind Gilbert. "Wait a bit, then where... are you now?"

"Near a runway that was reserved for my troops' Nighthawks. I'm currently coordinating the departure." Gilbert loaded his gun while speaking. He had also taken off his military uniform and finished changing into his battle outfit. The latter felt more familiar on his body.

"Of Leidenschaftlich's Special Offense Force!? Yo-You... are commanding them and going for the rescue?!"

"That's right."

“You... said you wouldn’t see her! Is it okay if you do?!”

Silence. Gilbert believed the conversation would drag on for much longer if he revealed that Violet apparently knew about his survival.

“Why are you quiet? Isn’t that it?”

“When everything is over, I’ll apologize and report to you too. This is in order to save Violet. There’s no other option anymore. If we do end up meeting, I’ll beg for forgiveness...”

Their time to talk was shortening.

“Then prepare yourself for the worst. This is something that you caused.” Hodgins said something similar to what Dietfriet had. “So, what will you do once the Nighthawks take flight? Don’t tell me, you’ll jump onto the train while it’s in motion?”

“That’s right.”

“You really... are insane sometimes! A knight-in-shiny-armor gone crazy over love! Haha! I’ll praise you for that.”

Hodgins’s laughter could be heard. As Gilbert was unable to counter-argue, his face reddened.

“By the way, eh, are you... still a lieutenant-colonel? Wasn’t there some deal about you receiving other two rank promotions?”

“You’re full of questions... They waited for my injuries to heal. I became a colonel a few days ago.” With his prosthetic left arm, Gilbert stroked the eyepatch on his palm, which hid the right eye he had lost. Even with only one side of his vision, his handling of weapons had not deteriorated.

“And yet you’re the one in command!? That’s even more insane! The higher-ups sure made a great concession!”

“No more mocking, Hodgins. I told you, didn’t I? If it’s for Violet’s sake, I don’t nitpick my methods. Of course, our objective is to settle down the current situation, but there’s no way that can be done without me commanding on-site. Earlier, you said you’d do everything you can. If those words weren’t a lie, I want you to show me your data-acquiring skills. Is there any information that

the military doesn't know?"

"Got it. I'll tell you. But lemme just say one thing."

"What is it...?"

"You... turn into a huge idiot when it comes to Little Violet, huh. I... like that a lot."

"Shut up."

Why was that? Between friends, even if they spent a long while without speaking to each other, once they eventually opened their mouths and reached out to one another, they would end up talking as if the flow of time in that gap had never existed. The two forgot about back when they had stopped contacting each other and begun to chatter.

"I'll say what we have here, so you tell me too. Let's have an info exchange. The hijackers had in them the national emblem of a certain northern country, Rohand. Remnants of an extremist party that also caused trouble before by raiding a construction site when the railroad of the intercontinental train was being made are in that group. Still, it seems they were not supposed to be a number of people significant enough to cause such a big incident... they might've gotten more collaborators."

Gilbert ran a pen through his notebook. He also spoke about what he had heard during the meeting, as well as about the demands for a political offender kept in the Altair Prison to be handed over and to migrate to another continent in exchange for the passengers. He was aware that they were not ones to negotiate with in normal circumstances.

"Our information and yours aren't that different in terms of freshness. The train is currently making a stop at a water supply point. It's been confirmed through the supplementary information from the Leidenschaftlich National Railway that an engineer and some engineer assistants of the train were killed, and that the criminals sought substitute personnel. It's good that we were able to buy time, but you said that their numbers must be small since they're taking such reckless actions despite having a plan, right? Normally, when an anti-government organization swells up and spontaneously discharges like this, it's mostly due to worthless bastards being drawn into it by a primary factor of

making numbers balance. Meaning they have caused a situation where there's no turning back, huh?"

"Either way, they wanna slap the South in the face and migrate to a country that isn't their own. Did you know that Rohand's territory is on the railway's track? For example, if we had been the ones to lose the war, Leidenschaftlich's towns had been destroyed and a roadbed had been built across it, what would you think?"

"I would provisionally evacuate, store weapons, gather warriors and come back."

"If it were me, I'd find my happiness in another land, but you'd do something like that. This is probably also valid for the enemies. And surely there is a comrade of theirs in the Altair Prison whom they'd think that could do it. If I... were the criminal of this incident, and you were in Altair, maybe I'd have done the same as them."

—*If it were you, you'd take a smarter route.* Gilbert thought but did not voice it.

Perhaps having been able to realize something from Gilbert's silence, Hodgins said quickly, "The enemies are level-headed enough only not to kill the passengers, but they'll soon give in to despair. If that happens, there's a high chance that the number of deaths will rise. You said our information wasn't different in freshness, but I still have material. The regulations after the calling-off of military forces in the North are rigid. If the hijackers managed to get weapons, it's most possible that they imported them from another continent. It's been confirmed there are armed groups that get their hands into weapons that we're not yet familiar with through entwined foreign trades with other countries and continents. Still, it looks like the relationship between the arm dealers of these continents and the people of ours who want weapons can't be considered good. It seems the fees are pretty overcharged. Meaning they're being taken advantage of."

"Even Leidenschaftlich has problems in foreign trades with other continents. They are wary of our natural resources and don't stop just at interchanging goods, but also try to buy lands here. It is, aah... almost like **that**."

“Yeah, like a forewarning that there’s some project involving the South and North. You get it? There’s a need to understand the background of the incident happening right now. At first glance, it looks like a fight between Leidenschaftlich, of the South, and a country of the North, Rohand, but in reality, there’s one more entity. It’s only watching. But it exists. As a third influence, it wants to know just how well Leidenschaftlich can handle a situation like this one. Other than being on the side that won the war, we’re also the greatest military nation.”

“Migration plans, another continent, new armaments.”

Albeit messily, a summary of the incident was unraveling within Gilbert. A thread trailed around his mind, and the results of the accumulated information came out. One: the contents of the demands made by the hijackers were that, once the intercontinental train arrived at its last station in the port town, the political offender and war criminal of the North were allowed to migrate with them to another continent. Two: they, who were from the defeated nation, had been able to execute the hijacking through the other continent’s support.

Those with good intuition could tell. The current situation had been induced because the trigger of a next war was about to burst. Just when everyone was thinking that the horrors of wartime had settled down in their continent, there were now other continents targeting it.

As Gilbert’s supposition wound up hitting bull’s-eye, his head grew heavy. “Our victory needs to be overwhelming.”

“Will Leidenschaftlich dispatch rescue troops other than yours?”

“The orders have been given. They’ll target the water supply point, attack, help the passengers escape and engage into battle. It’ll be an ambush from the army garrison of the North. If, by any chance, they still strive towards migrating to another country, the ones they’d have to face next would be the navy. My brother is also on the move. But we can’t let them get to the sea. For that, I have a favor to ask you.”

“What is it? You can say anything.”

“Buy the land of a water supply point station that the train is expected to pass by.”

“Hah?”

“Trains usually require water supply. It’s a one-stop-per-hour ratio. Once the water is replenished, we’ll lose an opportunity of rescue again. However, it’s predictable that they will use hostages as shield and the dispatched northern troops would have to allow their passage. I want a place where they will definitely stop at. And then, I want the railroad to be destroyed so that they won’t be able to not stop... That’s why, buy the property, and break it down.”

“Buy it’, you say, like it’s something easy...”

“You can’t?”

“Don’t ask stupidities. It’s not a matter of being able to or not. I **will** do it. My employee is on that thing!”

“Since it’s you, I did think you’d say that. The lands of the passing points are divided into two types: those owned by the Leidenschaftlich National Railway and those that were rented from the original owners and are in use. When I looked at the map, I was able to narrow the places where we’d be able to have a flashy ambush battle, yet in which it would hardly affect other territories and that the train would afterwards undoubtedly stop at once far away from the water supply point, down to a few stops. And among them, there is only one point that is a private property. I want you to purchase it with your talent for business. From now, as soon as possible.”

Gilbert himself thought he was saying something unreasonable.

“You... Gilbert, you...”

However, he was certain that, if it was his best friend, the latter would definitely manage it.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait. Why did you narrow that down?”

“To tell the truth, the major-general didn’t approve of this strategy.”

“Well, there’s no way anyone would immediately nod at being told ‘let’s buy land, destroy it and kick our enemies’ asses’, is there?”

“It seemed I would have been able to convince him if I’d had more time, but unfortunately, I’m about to fly. I’ve decided right then to make of this not a

military, but a private strategy. The money will come from me. Places in possession of the Leidenschaftlich National Railway can't be negotiated. However, if it's a land up for rent owned by one person, it can be nominally made private. Buy it under your name. If you become the titular, whatever you do with it is your own business."

"Even so, it'd be bad to destroy it, right?! It's being rented by the National Railway, isn't it?! Even if it's private in name only, it's being used by the National Railway. I can't just go damaging the property."

"That's where your assistance comes. After the private property is sold, extort the one responsible for the National Railway. You can do so when the incident settles down. The Leidenschaftlich National Railway's crisis management will surely be interrogated about its absence after this case is finished. Say that you'll make an escape route for them. In normal circumstances, I'd rather have them hand the land over themselves, but that's impossible for bureaucratic bungling. That's why we'll be the ones to propose it. If we let the criminals get to the sea, this won't end just with the ones responsible being fired. In exchange of us being able to go rampant in a private property, make people promise not to investigate them later on. And then, ask a newspaper company to..."

"I've been able to catch it somehow. You got me involved in this with the intention of making it into some impressive tale, right?"

"You're quick."

The plan that Gilbert had come up with was like a sequence.

The postal company president Claudia Hodgins, for the sake of his employee's protection and out of worry for the safety of the people taken as hostages, would suggest a cul-de-sac to take place in a territory rented by the Leidenschaftlich National Railway itself (said postal company president was also a former Leidenschaftlich soldier and carried the achievement of having been promoted to major). Fearing the situation's aggravation, even if the Leidenschaftlich National Railway were to predict through the suggestion of the property owner that the railroad would hardly be usable afterwards, it would prioritize actual lives over expenses and agree to the scheme.

Henceforth, an arrangement of the strategy being transmitted by someone from the army and the plan being immediately executed would be printed out. In reality, the land would not belong to Hodgins since the one paying for it would be Gilbert Bougainvillea, but as long as such fact did not see the light of day, any sort of grandiose story could be created about it. Unlike the current circumstances, severe public criticism was something that could be eased.

“I’m counting on you as insurance. If this doesn’t work, we’ll just carry it over to the next water supply point. However, there will be more victims, and the possibility of Violet’s survival becoming dubious will be higher. A fast resolution is necessary. I’ll let you make use of one of my subordinates. He has the documents for the land’s purchasing, so call him. You’ll probably have to negotiate with its representative, but if it’s you, you can work it out with your misleading flattery.”

“I’m honored for the compliments! But this will definitely be busted later. People know about our relationship, right?”

Gilbert turned around upon being tapped on the shoulder. It seemed the Nighthawks were ready.

“I don’t mind even losing my position for this. But I will try to prove that I’m not someone who can be cut off so easily. Rather than me, what’s important is the citizens’... Violet’s safety. Listen, I don’t forgive those who put the citizens of our Leidenschaftlich in danger, no matter who they are. A number of lives have already been lost. We’ll definitely pay them back. It doesn’t matter who the other party is, be them the North or another continent. Our Leidenschaftlich does not yield to foreign invasion or pressure. It’s been like that ever since its foundation. I will make the enemies regret laying their hands on Leidenschaftlich.” The Bougainvillea heir spat out his quiet anger in a voice tone that even his friend would find ominous.

It was precisely seven hours and sixteen minutes into the evening. Why was there no one around?

One of the hijackers cried out upon seeing the state of Dining Car 2. He looked about. The interior of the dark car shook with the steam whistle of the locomotive.

The train, which had been making a stop, had finally begun to move again. The Leidenschaftlich National Railway had responded to the hijackers' demands and sent replacement personnel to the pitiful engineer, Samuel LaBeouf. He was currently attempting to drive while another hijacker thrust a gun at him.

Things had expanded to a point in which it was impossible to understand many aspects of the several happenings. One of the aspects was the empty dining car that the man was staring at. Not only the passengers but also his companions, who had been in control of Dining Car 2, were nowhere to be found.

The man recalled a cryptic ghost story passed down at the northern homeland that he used to live in. It stated that when one was abroad a speeding vehicle in the middle of the night, they should not look outside from anywhere other than its front, whether it was a carriage, a car or even a train.

—*The reason why is...*

He put a hand on the frame of the only window that had been left open.

—*...because non-humans are guided by the moonlight and follow it.*

Then opened the window to see the back of the car.

—*A frightening ghost might be baring its fangs and running after us.*

However, what chased the train was nothing but the moon floating in the night sky. The smell of prairies during nighttime only granted the man trapped inside the box called a train slight coldness instead of terror.

“Hah.” The man caressed his chest. Apparitions did not exist – he was able to confirm that much. Rather, what remained unconfirmed was the cause behind the disappearance of the passengers and his comrades.

“I will be taking this.” The words the man heard came from a direction he would never have imagined. By the moment he both caught them and understood their meaning, his collar was simultaneously grabbed and he was tossed outside.

The train was in motion. It was not too fast, but no one would survive unharmed should they fall off. Before the man collided with the ground, what

he saw were blue eyes staring at him from atop the train and a golden light sparkling against the moonlit night. While swallowing his breath at such beauty, the man bounced onto the soil like a small ball.

Violet readied her position on the hurtling train. Her hips carried a military saber that she had borrowed from the man when throwing him out. Her body was already equipped with numerous weapons snatched from other hijackers.

After experimenting the saber, dagger, and pistol sword that did not suit her lovely ribbon-tie one-piece once for each, she went back to the saber. It seemed their heaviness was not yet overwhelming, and she put them away in weapon holders that also appeared to have been stolen.

Violet's fighting style was similar to a spider's. At first, she had merely defeated one hijacker when bumping onto him, as he had sensed the strange state of the freight car and had come to check it, but as others would come searching for their comrade who had not returned, she concluded, "this is a good opportunity" and hid herself while on standby, eliminating them one by one. Right before losing interest, the hijackers would see the upside-down figure of a woman appearing from outside the window and let out a scream before fainting. She had laid out the yarns and was hunting the preys that she had successfully drawn into her spider web.

There had been four people monitoring the hostages in Dining Car 1. The only remaining hijacker had continued keeping watch while surrounded by people. As he became unable to handle the eeriness of Dining Car 2, he went to seek support from the car ahead.

Although the passengers of Dining Car 2 had been freed during the train's stop, there was nothing that could be done to somehow rescue the ones of Dining Car 1, even if the guard's eyes could be evaded. Violet gazed forward as if glaring. She decided that her next task was to take control of the engine room and make the train stop again.

Violet advanced while deftly walking onto the scaffold. Her resolve had no signs of crumbling as she was headed, silent and unaccompanied, towards a seizure battle. She was no longer a girl soldier. There were no commander officers beside her. She was treading through a life in which she did not have

back-ups, with no option other than making choices on her own. As a result of that, she was taking actions without anyone's instructions in order to help the passengers. She was attempting to do what she could as Violet Evergarden.

"Major."

The train that they happened to be riding in had been taken over. If she had the ability to help them escape, she would simply do so. In retrospect, in case her Lord was indeed alive and in the army, she had utmost trust that he was definitely thinking of a method to save that train, even if said person was not aware of what she was doing.

"Sounds of turbines?" Violet suddenly looked up at the empty night sky. A noise unlike the one of the train's sprinting mixed with it in her ears. She could see several flying objects looming right over the train.

"There! That's the culprit!"

A bullet gushed through the night sky. A gunshot echoed along with a man's voice. From within the locomotive, a gun was aimed at her. One of the hijackers, who had been in a frenzy while looking for the passengers that were nowhere in sight, as well as the person who had most likely caused such a situation, had finally found Violet running on top of the train.

Violet peeled her eyes away from the objects flying in the night sky and concentrated on the battle. She sped up onto the locomotive while lowering her posture. After taking some distance, she constrained the criminals inside the locomotive by shooting at them, then resumed running. The best idea was to get inside the car as soon as possible, but it did not seem that she would be able to do so immediately.

"Who... are you?! The one who helped the hostages of the rear car escape was you, wasn't it?!"

The men climbed from the window of the Passenger Car to get rid of Violet. From both behind and ahead of her, the men bearing the emblem of the North were gradually approaching her with the intention of attacking from both sides.

"Answer! Who are you?!"

"I am a mere traveler."

"Liar! Did you know about our plans? No... it's not like there would be anyone foolish enough to come aboard alone if they knew. Come here! We'll interrogate you about the details. Put down the weapons."

Violet put the gun back into the holder.

"Wrong! Leave the weapons at your feet!"

Not listening to the restraint order, she took a large step. "Who..." while saying so, Violet landed on the chest of the one that had been threatening her, her fist diving into his face.

The fist that came from a woman so fine-looking was much heavier than it seemed. The man rolled down, taking a few others with him.

"Who... said anything about complying with you?" with her low grumble, battle commenced.

The men charged at her from back and front. Firstly, she crisscrossed the knife bouts from a man who had come from behind. She defended herself with her left hand, grasped his face and pushed him backwards. As he faltered, she swept him off his feet and, just like that, delivered a kick to drop him off the train.

An enemy who rushed towards her from the front attempted to hit her with his bare hands. It was a tall and broad man. He probably had confidence in his physical strength. Merrily, he targeted Violet's face. Receiving a series of kicks with both arms, Violet aimed for an opening, placed a hand onto the hull and rotated her long legs. While he was overtaken by her kick, she sank the fist of her free hand into his stomach. But the man seemed to have a hard protection plank hidden under his clothes. She did feel that something had bent, but there were no sounds of bones breaking.

"I'll crush your face! Die!" After a pause, the man raised his fist towards her once more.

Violet accepted it with one hand, pulled the gun from the holster and shot his thigh at close range.

"You... that's unfa..."

Nothing was cowardly about Violet, who had been raised in the battlefields. She gently pressed the collapsing man's shoulder, and he disappeared into the dark with a scream. As Violet was on her own yet again, the rattling of the train resounded in her ears.

That was the power of the woman named Violet Evergarden. It was an actual proof of strength from the weapon whose name was not in the registrations of Leidenschaftlich's army.

The train's hijacking plan was failing in a progressive fashion. The perpetrators mostly carried out a rash behavior, but that was not the direct cause. They had enough military force to control the weak passengers. However, and Auto-Memories Doll who prided herself in having the strength of an unmatched warrior had ended up mingling with said passengers.

The moon in the sky had been enclosed in nightly clouds and temporarily disappeared, but the moonshine slowly began to gleam down over the world again. When the moonlight guided Violet once more, there was a different enemy in front of her. Even without being invited, Violet showed herself to them.

"Are you... a soldier of Leidenschaftlich?" The low voice of a man could be heard. It was a quiet way of speaking. He had features that gave off an impression of transparency and steadiness. Although its color was dull in the nightly darkness, he was clad in an azure coat. Rohand's national emblem was embroidered on it. For whatever reason, he had a long case in hands.

"No, I am no longer a soldier now. I have a question as well. Are you the strongest person among the ones responsible for this takeover? If possible, I would like to fight whoever that person is."

The man gripped his case firmly. As he did so, its exterior detached and fell to his feet, revealing a bayonet. With flawless etiquette, he bowed at Violet. "I am the leader of Rohand's chivalric order... as for my name, I've already abandoned it. I am the strongest one that you seek. I have... seen you in the battlefield. You're Leidenschaftlich's witch, right?" The leader of Rohand's chivalric order observed Violet under the moonlight with an indescribable gaze. It denoted his fear and wrath at the fact that the young demon of the battlefields had grown

up so much and stood before him yet again. However, she was but a beautiful woman no matter how he looked at her, and so, he was perplexed. "Your fighting form was... just like a fierce god... I've heard no rumors about you after the Continental War ended, but... I see, so you've been doing this kind of obscure work."

The air that steamed from the leader was unlike the other men that she had fought.

"I apologize for not meeting your expectations, but the witch you speak of has already departed from this world and is not a soldier anymore. I am now only a traveler. I am not doing anything assassin-like, either. I did give your comrades a rough treatment, but they are sure to be alive. Although this is arrogant of me, as a passenger of this train, I have a request. Please release all the hostages."

"That cannot be done."

"I suppose so... We are being used as material for some sort of trade. Even I can understand that much. Why are you doing such a thing?"

"It's to take back the things... and the person... that you guys have trampled over."

"Do you mean to start another war?"

The chivalric leader chuckled. His voice rose into laughter, but it did not reach his eyes. "I'm sorry, but want to ask you something. Is the war over to you?"

Did she not think she would ever be asked such a question? Violet grew stiff.

"I can't read you very well since you're expressionless, but the fact that you aren't answering means you have a clue, right? That's what soldiers are about. Forever and always... our memories of viciousness stay with us like remnants of burn marks and do not disappear. It will never be over for me."

The exchange had a sense of *déjà-vu*.

"However... in truth, it is already over."

"Still, war will happen once more."

Such words were Violet's former self in essence.

“The faces of my deceased companions. The smell of corpses. The weight of a gun snatched from an enemy’s dead body, the night I spent in pain after being beaten by a senior officer without knowing the motive. I had been able to endure all this... because I believed that, someday, the war would end and supposedly something brilliant awaited me in the future. But how was it in reality? My friend that had been going for the same dream as myself was put in prison, the higher-ups who started the war are living leisurely, and now our nation is becoming our enemy. The soldiers who protected the citizens with their lives at stake are labeled as useless and get stones thrown at them by peasants. My hometown was gone without a trace as the victorious country laid a railway track for its trains over the motherland that we tried to protect. I also tried to forget about it. But, in my heart, forever and ever, even now...”

There were deep dark bags under the chivalric leader’s eyes.

“...even though I wake up in the morning, sleep at night and I am breathing, a fury that I cannot suppress burns within my body at unexpected times. To solve this, I have no choice but kill your country, which made me this way. Not just the South. The West, which conspired with it, too. This is still just a tiny beginning. From this point on, our original lives will start. Are you satisfied? If I have to talk, given that I’m not so good at conversations, I’ll do it with my fists.”

There was a reason why he had said “our”. One, two, three more people who wore the same azure coat as him appeared and took out the bayonet from their own long cases and aimed the weapons at Violet. On top of the train in movement, the former chivalric order with their bayonets and a former girl soldier wielding several kinds of weapons put themselves in position and stood facing one another.

It was like the law of causal response. Violet’s past pursued her no matter how much time passed, never letting her go.

Violet held onto the brooch on her chest only once. “Why... did things turn out this way?” was a question that surfaced in everyone’s minds when cruel things happened, but not in hers. That was because the one who used to be her Lord had told her, “without ever blaming anyone, live on”.

“I am a taciturn myself, so that would be of help.” Violet unsheathed the

saber and bowed in a lady-like manner.

At seven hours and thirty-four minutes, Hodgins had proceeded to a branch office of Leidenschaftlich's National Estate Purchase Agency. It was the place that had been selected and that he had relied on for the construction of the CH Postal Service's headquarters. Upon claiming that he had a negotiation to discuss with the person in charge, whom he was on close terms with, the receptionist promptly gave him a positive response. Separated by a desk in a private room that he had been led to, the two of them were gazing at each other.

"No, even if you say that, President Hodgins..." Compared to before he had listened to Hodgins, the one in charge – John Wishaw – showed signs of discomfort in his face.

He was a man in his mid-thirties who appeared young enough to be in his twenties. He was often despised for his looks, working as the manager of that branch office regardless.

"Are there any issues?" Fronting him, Claudia Hodgins's way of speaking was in accordance to their ages, but he was one or two levels above the latter in being a dandy. Normally, one could often witness an attitude that poked fun at people coming from him, but the expression of seriousness he displayed in critical moments could stir people's hearts, even with them being of the same sex.

John recoiled at Hodgins's attacking stare. "As I said, your request is extremely hard to accept. About the land ownership purchase of the village you asked for, Ritorno, just acquiring one section of it is already hard, let alone the entire thing..."

"The truth is that just its train station is fine, but it'll earn us more profit to buy the whole village while we're at it."

"The station is the village's public property, and cannot be a subject of general estate negotiations."

"No, that's wrong, isn't it? I contacted the Leidenschaftlich Legal Affairs Bureau before coming here. The station is a private property. It's one of the

large pieces of land that the village head, Miss Ian, inherited from her ancestors. The railroad that was laid down for the sake of the mining industry that said ancestors had started, and the station that was built for the same reason is Ritorno village's. Leidenschaftlich's National Railway uses the station as a water supply point for the trains to make stops at, but passengers can't get off there. Because it's a private property. You'd see that if you check the estate registration. Can you open the file in your hands?"

Albeit reluctantly, John opened the documents regarding Ritorno's territorial data. The proprietary was the head of Ritorno's coalmines.

"You sure... are knowledgeable."

What Hodgins had said was true.

"It's pretty famous. The station where people can't get off at, that is. It's got romance to it, right? But it's not like no one can get off at it. Those who have Ritorno's coalmine labor certificate and its residents can. It's because it's a private estate that outsiders can only enter and leave from a place other than the passage exclusive of those who have permission after undergoing troublesome procedures... Now, let's return to the problem. I just want the land that has the railway where the intercontinental train will run across."

—I'll persuade you. I'll persuade you. I'll persuade you. I'll definitely persuade you.

Hodgins made gestures and drew John Wishaw into his own story, almost like a stage actor. His eyes narrowed softly, but there was no kindness in them. "Shall I explain the usefulness of this transaction in an easy way again? Ritorno village is currently undergoing a continuous decline in population. It used to be famous for its mines, but mining became impossible due to an accident from several years ago. Although the railroads remain, the number of workers is decreasing and young people are leaving. It's also not a place for tourism. It's clear that it will turn into ruins. Part of the village was rented when the railroad was laid down. The village's economy comes from clinging onto the money earned from that with all their might. How many people are there in the village now?"

"Around ninety..."

“That’s about the same number as a few ten-people households in a family gathering. Can they withstand the winter this year? Can they live on without sucking up to the youngsters who work away from home?”

“They must be... having a hard time.”

“I can see the finale of this tale. But there’s something that can turn it into a ‘Never-Ending Story’. Currently, our company does postal services and dispatches Auto-Memories Dolls, but there’s a project that we recently started working on. The manufacturing industry. Right now, we order letters, stamps and seal wax from other companies, but we are planning to manufacture and sell our own in the future. I’ll hire all the villagers for that, from elders to children, as long as their hands can move.” Hodgins stood up and sat on the sofa that John was on.

Although there was a distance between the two, it was short. John’s nervousness increased, but he was somewhat relieved in comparison to when Hodgins was in front of him.

It was psychologically less menacing to talk side-by-side than have a face-to-face conversation. The lesser one had to look at the other’s face, the more the tension would alleviate. Hodgins was never taught about such fact by anyone, instead acting on his own experience.

“What are you worried about?”

“Is there any realtor who could instantly close a deal after being told that the land to be bought would be transformed into a battlefield?”

“I see... There is a resistance... I get it, I get it. I totally get it. Of course, I won’t force you.” He repeated the words that empathized empathy, then lowered down the conditions already presented, “If I can’t buy the Ritorno village, I’ll buy the proposed site. I’ll buy it anyways. I explained the reason why from the get-go. I want to solve the hijacking incident happening right now faster than what the army is taking to make a move. For that, I need a place where there could be gunfire. I want to buy not only the station but the whole village and introduce business to it as an assurance. Y’know, I’m in the same position.” Next, he presented the conditions once more in a direction that appealed to emotions, “A girl who is like a daughter to me and was left in my care by the

most precious friend in my life is on that train. I want to save her. I have connections with the Leidenschaftlich army. I tried asking about it, and the way things are now, it seems it'd be hard to execute a rescue if the train doesn't stop. The best idea is to aim for a water supply point, attack, help the passengers escape and bring about the battlefield, but the military forces can't be immediately readied just with forestalling. It would turn not into support from our own country, but into an ambush attack in a land occupied by the North's army. Incidents like that are out of reach from the army's handling, and the one that gets mobilized is the Special Firearms Attack Unit."

The Special Firearms Attack Unit consisted of offense troops dispatched whenever there were cases that would be too much for the military police to deal with in domestic and overseas territories owned by Leidenschaftlich. As Leidenschaftlich, which had struggled with invasions during its long history, had always been successful in its interceptions, it would build national military bases in the invading countries as a partial compensation. During the Continental War, they had taken the role of stock areas as well. The Special Firearms Attack Unit was certain to be present in military divisions and maintained the peace and security of their vicinities. The one which would be mobilized that time was not the troop from the division near the station that the train had already left behind, but the troop from the division that lay further ahead.

"That's why I will buy the land where a water supply point that the train is expected to pass by soon is located."

John gulped noisily at Hodgin's words.

"I'll buy it and destroy the rails. I'll create a place in which the army will be able to move around easily. It will also be advantageous for the Special Firearms Attack Unit, which will arrive before they do. The conclusion of this situation will be much faster if they come, right? Anyways, I want to make the target stop moving. It's not about being able to do it or not. I will do it. My employee is on board. John, are you married? You aren't, right? Then, are your parents doing well? I see. I wonder what you'd think if your parents were aboard that hijacked train with guns pointed at them in this very moment. I believe that the number of deaths will be much smaller if you help me right here and now. On the other hand, if you refuse, the risk of who-knows-how-many people dying will

increase. You could be either a hero or a reaper.”

“B-But, we’d be doing that without the government’s authorization, right?”

Hodgins grinned. “The responsibility for it isn’t yours. After all, the contractor is me. If what we’re about to do works out, it’d be just me doing whatever with my own land.”

“That is... inconceivable. Are you saying you have personal troops or something? Even if you manage to stop the train by chance, rescuing the passengers would be impossible...”

Hodgins did not display frustration in front of that young man, who was completely seized with fear. On the contrary, he put a hand on the latter’s knee and spoke in an even gentler and sweeter approach than before, “I’m the one who decides whether it’s impossible or not.” However, he was clad in a forceful aura. “I’m not an idiot either. There’s no way I’d be a stranger to battlefields. I’m not proud of it, but I used to lead troops in the past.”

A scent that had been unknown to John during his entire life wafted from Hodgins to the tip of his nose. As he glanced at his side, their eyes met. The latter’s greyish blue eyes, good physique, broad shoulders and warm chest were right on sight.

“I... the fighting power that I have... I don’t wanna call it ‘fighting power’, but still... I now move on by trusting the power of the people that lend me their strength.” His hand that had rested on John’s knee grasped the latter’s own hand without his notice.

In regards of Hodgins, his field of expertise – having a way with words – was one that could capture others, but its true value did not lie there.

“Aren’t you just an mediator? There’s only one thing I want you to do.”

At any rate, his ability to blend poison and honey in order to deceive people was unmatched.

“I want you to propose this deal to the village chief. That’s all, John.” As John remained silent, Hodgins put another hand on his knee. “I want to get to know... your human candor.”

—*I'm sorry, beautiful-hearted youth.*

One step short of his next chessboard move, Hodgins felt his conscience ache.

—*I'm really sorry for dragging you into something like this. But there's someone who wants to make that place into a battlefield.*

His checkmate on John Wishaw was accompanied by a smile. “So, will you become one of the rescuers? If you can't do it, I don't mind contacting the village myself. You're a manager and I'm a trader. We're both proficient in talking, but if it were me, I could get the agreement of a client in five minutes. I'll show you that skill of mine.”

Over the double lines in the contract for land renting written on parchment, the name of the new contractor – Claudia Hodgins – was printed. As the document procedures were finished soundly, Hodgins unreservedly patted John's shoulder while the latter hung his head depressively as though wondering if they had not actually done something outrageous. Hodgins then called his company, the CH Postal Service, after being allowed to borrow the telephone.

Gilbert and Hodgins were not the only ones distressed by the current strife. After one ringback tone, Lux answered.

“Little Lux. Is everyone moving according to my instructions?”

“They've all been dispatched. If you give permission, President, I can call and get them to move right about now. It's mostly the postmen, though...”

“You've only gathered strong ones amongst the men, so that's okay. A fast-working secretary is the best thing...!”

“Have you already put the plan in motion?”

“Poor lands are bought often, after all. It's easier than seducing a girl. More importantly, the station of the village I'm about to mention, Ritorno village... tell everyone to lay waste to it, no matter what method they use. We've talked to the villagers. Anyhow, it has to get to a point where the fact that the train won't be able to pass it by will be clearly visible from the engine room. Don't let them forget to wear a red cloth so that others will be able to tell them apart from the

enemies. Also, tell them to fire a smoke bomb as a signal that the plan is being executed.”

“It might be late for this but, hum, even if it’s for the sake of a rescue... won’t the influential people of this country be angry at us or something...?”

“That’s right. Even if it’s my property, people will probably be upset. After all, a private business – a postal company, no less – will be taking actions that will bring big damage to the economic activities of the state management.”

“Are you all right with this?”

“What we’ll do is destroy the railroad and protect the people who will escape from the train when it suddenly stops. We won’t interfere with the military... as long as the guys who are there don’t go rampant... most likely... yeah. Even if they do, getting yelled at is my job. I have an acquaintance from a newspaper company. If this incident brings something good, I’ll ask them to write an article that will make it difficult to put the blame on us. Everyone involved will be livid, but big organizations are weak against public opinion that the army joins into, and there are matters that could be used against us, which is why I will do something about it. I won’t let anyone do anything that would end with you stranded in the streets, so stay calm. Anyways, just tell everyone that, once the locomotive stops, they must concentrate on rescuing the passengers, and run away if they think things are dangerous. That’s all. I’m about to head there on the Nighthawk that my friend arranged for me.”

“President Hodgins.”

“What is it, Little Lux?”

“I want to go too.”

“No can do. I need someone patrolling the office in my stead. I trust and count on you.”

“Violet was my first friend! I... may not be able to do anything, but... I want to go help her even if I do nothing!” Lux said with a tearful voice.

“Little Lux. It’s not like you can’t do anything. It’s because you can that I’m leaving the company to your care. What you can do now is let me stay free. There’s a lot of work that can be done as I move. That’s linked to helping Little

Violet. I'll definitely save her and come back, so just you wait."

"Really...?"

"Really. I'm always causing you trouble, but have faith in me."

"I do. I do, so please come back soon... as fast as possible... with everyone, I mean."

"I will come back. To you, who are protecting my place to return to, that is."

Eight o'clock in the evening – the time in which people's days would come to an end and they would be arriving at their homes. In a certain town of a certain country, Cattleya Baudelaire was having an argument with the cabby of a shared carriage. It seemed that the streetlights illuminating her almost meant to reveal her anxiety just from how unreliably they shone.

"The carriage arranged for today has been completely occupied, so I can't let you get on." The cabby's explanation was mixed with a candid advice.

"Like I said, I'm begging you!"

Cattleya's nose and cheeks were dyed red. Such thing would be a given when exposed to cold weather or quarreling, but she was rosy up to her eyes as if they were bloodshot due suppressing the urge to cry.

"You know it, right, that the intercontinental train was hijacked?! I... have to go there! My... my... my colleague is... my frie... nd is... I... got to know about it, and then... and then..."

Cattleya, who had come to find out about the circumstances, had been traveling in an extreme rush after finishing work. She had already passed by the transportation facilities of two cities. When doing so, she had contacted the CH Postal Service and was finally close to the coalmine village that Hodgins had instructed her to go to. The last vehicle headed to that village was about to depart.

"Don't say such selfish things, Young Lady! Just move already. The world doesn't spin around you. You're causing problems to the customers that went through the proper procedures."

"I'd do the procedures if I could! But Violet might die! I... I... have to go help

her! That girl... is super strong, but now that things have come to this, I don't know if she's okay! If she dies, then... That's why I want to go! Please, I could even just go holding onto the scaffold, so let me in!"

Seeing Cattleya shed tears in exasperation, the cabby was at a loss of words. "I'd like to do so if I could..." He looked into the carriage. The people inside were giving him irritated looks, telling him to hurry up and go. However, there was a single man who stood up without glaring at him.

The carriage's doors, which had been closed, opened up. From within it, a dark-haired man with a gentle aura poked his head out. "Hey, I'll get down. Let her take my place." He had a distinctive voice tone.

"Master... but... you..."

"I don't mind it. I'll stay in this town for one more night. Can you prepare the earliest carriage of tomorrow morning for me?" The man broke into an uplifting smile.

The cabby was exceedingly moved by his overflowing kindness. Those who worked in the service industry would mostly meet clients with troubles. Finding such a compassionate one was a first in his long life working as a cabby. His chest grew warm due to having heard about Cattleya's situation as well.

"Hey, Young Lady! Be thankful to this kind person... dang it. Master, I'm unloading your luggage. Young Lady, give me yours."

"E-Eh?"

"Someone is getting off so that you can replace him. So you'll be able to hop in and go to where your friend who is about to die is at. Good for you..."

"Seriously...? T-Thank you. Thank you very much!"

"The one you should thank is that young man." The cabby said while taking her luggage.

Still unable to believe the luck that had befallen her, she faced the man while still surprised and bowed her head. "T-Thanks! Thanks for real! I'll pay the fee for your stay; thanks for real!"

The man let out a giggle at Cattleya's aspect and stretched his hand out. He

wiped the teardrops traveling down her cheeks with his fingertips. The act was so natural that Cattleya had not been able to react negatively. Rather, she embraced a feeling of ecstasy that was almost like how she would feel around Hodgins.

“H-Hum... erm...”

“I don’t mind it, Young Lady.”

The man’s orbs somehow held a cohesive power. The mole under his hazel eye was charming.

“You’d said ‘Violet’, hadn’t you? Violet Evergarden?”

“Yeah, you... hum, do you happen to know her?”

“That’s right. I had her write a letter for me once. I guess...” After being quiet for a brief moment as if in thought, he spoke with profound significance, “hm, that you could say... we have a deep relationship which we can’t tell people about. We’re also old friends. I’d intended to go see her in a bit, but it seems Leidenschaftlich is getting involved in stuff that reeks of fire. I’ll let some more time pass to go see her. Can you send her my regards?” With a black cloak on, the man started walking away as if melting into the night.

“W-What’s your name?! I’ll give her... your name!”

As Cattleya said so, the man turned around and laughed. His pale skin made him look like a ghost against the nightly road.

“Edward Jones.” The man waved his hand, and Cattleya waved back with a big smile.

The fact that nobody noticed he was actually a fugitive formerly on death row was one of the happenings of that night.

Also at eight o’clock, Gilbert Bougainvillea was glaring at the ground after setting his body out of the Nighthawk. It was a sight that could make one feel dizzy. They were flying quite high, as to not be spotted by the enemy.

“Found it; it’s at northwest.”

“All right, Colonel Bougainvillea. I copy.”

At northwest was a glowing object rushing through the pitch-black terrain through the rifts between the clouds. It was the intercontinental train 'Femme Fatale'.

"This is Unit 1. We've found Femme Fatale. Begin descending."

With the signal from the pilot's radio, the total of seven Nighthawks systematically targeted the earth. In the process, they witnessed a fireball rising noisily from amongst the mountains in the direction of the train's track.

"That's the smoke bomb released from the water supply point that the Colonel talked about."

"Switch to strategy number three. Unit 5 will retreat. Join the Special Firearms Attack Unit, which is waiting for the train's arrival, and inform them of the situation. Say that the target has fortunately stopped due to a sudden forest fire or something of the sort. In order, from Unit 1 onward, the first half of the combatant team will land on the battlefield. We will seize Locomotive 1, 2 and 3, which are the heads of this thirteen-car train. Act after the emergency stop. Following the descend of the combatant team's first half, the second half will give support and start a surprise attack from the outside after landing. There will be civilians assisting us with protecting the crew. Whoever has a red cloth around their arm is a cooperator. Don't attack them by mistake. All right, listen up, everyone. The result of this strategy could determine the outcome of this unit's continuity. If it's you guys, you can probably work things out wherever you go, but I want you to stay somewhere my eyes can reach for a little longer."

The pilot of Unit 1 let out a chuckle. It was because Gilbert had said something off-character.

"I pray for our success. Well, first half, prepare to descend."

With a total of six units – save for the fifth, which had now withdrawn – and a personnel of twelve people, Gilbert's troop, the Leidenschaftlich Special Offense Force, was in formation and currently attempting to challenge the hijacked intercontinental train. Firstly, the six people in the back seats would land on top of the train and begin the suppression. The train's Locomotive 1, 2 and 3, which operated connectedly, would each be taken control of by two people. Divided into those who would go inside and those who would stay

outside, they would start their fight against the hijackers. Subsequently, the six people of the pilot group would lodge near the place scheduled as the train's next stop. It was a plan that allowed them to give cover to the six people infiltrating the train and protect the passengers from outside.

Gilbert led the members of the Special Offense Force, which was a compilation of a few elected people, not with the army conduct of a team that followed the usual form of leadership, but as ordinary squad members that would engage in a coordinated battle, after having them memorize the instructions of his meticulous plan. Even if they were short on one person, someone else would compensate by taking on their task.

Along with the members of the first group, Gilbert jumped from the Nighthawk charging forward and fell onto the top of the running train. Low-altitude flights could not last long. He had bet on the moment, leaped, and, after desperately grabbing hold of the hull, he fixed his stance on the train.

Evidently, the people inside would notice that there were aircraft turbine sounds overhead. A man who seemed to be a hijacker from Locomotive 1 came out. Gilbert stretched his artificial left arm and punched him in the face, and as the man recoiled, he grabbed the nape of the latter's neck, dragging him out from the window by the torso. Although a hijacker from the nearby Locomotive 2 fired his gun at Gilbert, he wound up hitting the unfortunate man whose body was half outside.

"Colonel, I'll be going ahead."

One of Gilbert's troop members, who had jumped off and landed after him, twisted his small body and kicked a hijacker from Locomotive 2 that had Gilbert at gunpoint, getting into the train in the process. Gilbert threw the man shedding blood out of the locomotive and sneaked into it as well.

"Please help! Don't kill me! If I die, so will the passengers and this locomotive!" the one who scream-cried as if begging for his life was the pitiful Samuel LaBeouf.

His assistants were dead. One young engineer assistant substitute was growing pale while attempting not to step on a corpse, and there was no sign of other hijackers.

“Please be at ease. I am a colonel of Leidenschaftlich’s army, Gilbert Bougainvillea. We are now initializing the rescue operation of this train’s passengers.”

“A-An ally? Someone from the military?” He had probably been bracing himself the whole time, since he shed a single tear with a clearly relieved expression.

Gilbert gently tapped his shoulder. “You were quite brave. It would have been the worst possible situation had you become distraught. You’re worthy of a medal.”

The sincerity in Gilbert’s facial traits and the aura surrounding him brought about a coaxing effect unlike the one Hodgins’s would. Anyone would be overcome with emotion upon being told such things by a beautiful soldier who had stretched out a helping hand to them during critical circumstances. Extremely touched, Samuel started trembling.

“Engineer, what is your name?”

“Sa-Samuel, Colonel.”

“Mister Samuel. Seeing you as a hero of Leidenschaftlich, there’s a favor I want to ask. What’s the next water supply point?”

“It’s Ritorno.”

“There’s another of our battalions in that place. There will be a big signal, so please make an emergency stop before entering the station’s premises.”

“‘S-Signal’, you say?”

“You will know the signal when you see it. After the stop, please evacuate from here and run to the direction of the village.”

Samuel and his assistant looked at each other.

“But, the passengers... and also... my other colleagues...” Samuel looked down at the bodies of his former co-workers.

“Even if they aren’t alive anymore, I want to hand them over to their families.” The two said in unison.

“Everything will be fine. Another unit of the army is supposed to arrive besides ours. Once everything is over, the ones who have passed on and you two will be delivered back to our country. However, I want those who can still move their legs to evacuate temporarily on their own. People with red cloths on their arms are overseeing the evacuation. Please go along with them.”

Perhaps due to feeling comforted, Samuel heaved a huge sigh. However, as though to shake off his relief, gunshots could be heard from somewhere.

—*Is someone... in the middle of a fight?*

Gilbert had ordered his subordinates to mingle with the turmoil of the emergency stop and crush the enemies after blowing smoke shells inside the cars. Should there be attacks from within Locomotive 3 onward, they would be as much of an obstacle as possible. Presently, the number of members who had come first was of six people. Out of the recruits selected for that elite troop, each bore combat power equal to ten ordinary soldiers.

“I think... this is probably from outside. Given the sound.”

Being told so by Samuel, Gilbert tried to set his head out the window. His face was hit by tree branches.

“Since a while ago, something’s been off. I’ve been hearing shouts. I... have been praised since I was little only for my good ears, so even if it’s from very far, I can hear people cursing.”

“You should be more proud of yourself. If what you say is true, we must aid whoever isn’t in the criminals’ side. Sorry. I’m going upstairs. Again, don’t forget your mission.”

At Gilbert’s words, Samuel nodded while showing a smile that denoted both delight and nervousness.

Despite hindered by the air resistance, Gilbert climbed onto the top of the train once more. The land on which the railway had been built probably used to have a flower garden in the past. Despite having been trampled on, the petals of the flowers that still held life scattered in the wind that opposed the train’s course. Within the world of pure darkness, colors such as white, blue, yellow, red and orange not yet mowed by autumn flew about. Although they would

eventually be reduced to dust, they created a stunning sight that decorated part of the world until their very end. Far beyond the rich hues, Gilbert found who he was looking for.

“Colonel, does the situation require reinforcements?!” The sixth unit descended after the others, and Gilbert’s pair had just landed as if on cue.

Gilbert stopped him with a hand. “Idris. It seems a civilian is fighting against the hijackers... We should have noticed it earlier.”

“We were frantic about our fall during the landing, after all. I also didn’t see anything. Well, then...”

“I will go. I will be nominating you as the next commander. If I by any chance do not return, you take charge.”

“Do you mean this seriously?”

“I do.”

“I have enough talent to get promotions and surpass you soon. Please, come back safely and continue standing in front of me. If I don’t have someone to chase...”

Instead of replying, Gilbert knocked his shoulder with a fist.

The group of people wearing blue coats erased the figure of the person he sought. Moreover, he would have to go all the way from the foremost car to get to her. It would take time.

Gilbert broke into run without hesitation.

Still at around eight o’clock, bullets flew from the bayonets of the chivalric men. Though they scratched Violet’s body, she dodged the direct hits and charged forward.

Scuffling above a moving vehicle against such a number of people was testing. Perhaps the other party was aware of that much, as someone other than the chivalric leader attacked first. Violet ran as if being sucked in by him. He defended himself from the saber swung down at him with the bayonet, but Violet was able to avoid the several gunshots by taking a large distance, and then started running adroitly once again.

“For our war comrades that were killed by you!”

Violet threw the sheath at the face of the man who blurted that out and dealt him a jump-kick instead of slashing him. The chivalric man, whose legs had lost balance, seemed to be about to collapse, but managed to stand still. He grinned and pulled the bayonet’s trigger.

A bullet was fired. With her eyes wide, Violet avoided it just by swiftly moving her neck. Her ribbons flew away. Blood welled from her bundle of braids and her hair came undone. Her ear had been grazed. The bleeding gusted, but she did not let any agonized sounds out.

Violet kicked the man in the chest with the tip of her boot. He screamed as he fell. However, the next person to go down was Violet herself. Even though she took on the repeated bayonet blows raining onto her back with the saber, she lost in weight. The saber itself was gone from her hands after being shot at.

The knight who had attacked Violet’s back found her as she somehow managed to cling to a window frame. When a surprised passenger tried to open said window, she inserted a hand into the gap and pushed it open with her mechanical arm. Just like that, she entered Passenger Car 2.

“What happened?!”

“That woman, she went inside...”

The remaining chivalric men realized that the lights of the Passenger Car 2, which had been shining from below their feet, were suddenly gone. The passengers were screaming.

“S-Should we go back in?”

“Wait.”

The other two men were silenced by the chivalric leader’s order of restraint.

Eventually, they could no longer hear any screams from the window that Violet had vanished into. They could not catch a single noise.

The chivalric leader was deep in thought. What kind of mess would the witch-like former girl soldier make next?

“Who... is down there?”

“Someone from the deployment armed organization that we hired.”

“There were people from it in the Panoramic Seats Car and Dining Car 1 too. But, the people positioned in these last two cars chased that woman up here... and were defeated. They’re supposedly being replaced, though.”

As the lights went off again, screams intensified from the Panoramic Seats Car and Dining Car 1, respectively. And then, they became quiet.

The chivalric leader felt goosebumps under his blue cloak at such bizarre phenomenon-like happenings. “She’s moving.”

‘Femme Fatale’ was a thirteen-car train composed, from front to back, of Locomotive 1, 2 and 3, Single-Room Sleeping Car 1 and 2, Simple Sleeping Car 1 and 2, Passenger Car 1 and 2, Panoramic Seats Car, Dining Car 1 and 2, and a freight car. Violet had jumped into Passenger Car 2. And then, she had probably moved on to Panoramic Seats Car and Dining Car 1. She herself had emptied Dining Car 2. What would she do by running off to a place that had nothing?

“Leader, maybe we really should go inside...” one of the chivalric men attempted to say, but his knee collapsed and he dropped down. A hole had been caved in it.

More gunshots followed suit.

“Get down!”

Bullets brushed their heads.

The unharmed chivalric man extended a hand to the injured one. The palm that had stretched out to help was shot.

“Retreat! Go in and call for reinforcements!”

“But, Leader—”

“Bring a gun of larger caliber!”

The subordinates crawled towards the concatenation while pressing down their fresh wounds.

The direction where the bullet had come from was undoubtedly from the last car. The shooting had been done in succession, but ceased yet again. The eyes

of the chivalric leader could see something blossoming from within the darkness.

“So they have escaped? I will pursue them later. Well, then, one more time.” ‘It’ politely called out to him and waited for him to stand up.

The woman was a battlefield conductor. She played melodies through concocting attacks, enhancing the emotions of her spectators with overwhelming martial arts, flabbergasting them with unimaginable actions and dominating the area completely. No matter how wet with blood her hair was, how torn her clothes were, or how many injuries she earned...

“Well, then, one more time.”

...she did not stop fighting. The chivalric leader had come to clearly understand why she was nicknamed the Warrior Maiden of Leidenschaftlich.

“Here I go, Major.”

Violet was likely out of bullets. She discarded the rifle that she had stolen from an enemy downstairs. She then took out a dagger. The weapon of her opponent, the chivalric leader, was a bayonet. The weight of their swing was different.

The two clashed with one another without saying anything. She dealt him consecutive blows with her knife-edge, but in the end, the dagger lost to the bayonet in weight and snapped. Violet disposed of the weapon that she became unable to use, tossing it away with her prosthetic arm without even sparing it a glance. It scratched the chivalric leader’s face, yet he, too, indomitably swung the bayonet from the side and hammered Violet’s body with it. As her posture crumbled with the impact, more strikes ensued. As Violet dodged from the tip of the bayonet’s blade, her chest was cut. She instantly set her hand out, swaying her weight just like that, turning her body over and taking some distance. Perhaps because he was indeed superior to the others, the attacks from the leader were different from theirs in agility.

Violet looked for weapons at hand. She reached into her skirt and pulled a ballistic knife out of the knife holder fastened around her thigh.

The needles once concealed in her hair had disappeared back when her

hairdo had come undone. The ballistic knife was the last weapon. After it, she only had her fists.

“Just how many weapons do you have hidden within your person?”

“They are for self-defense.” With her breath ragged like that of a beast, Violet stepped backwards. She knew that the next attack would be an important blow to determine the outcome of the battle. Although she was up against someone inferior to her in fighting power, anyone would be breathing heavily after continuously standing up and battling to that point. Regardless, she did not have so much as a teaspoon of will to lose.

That was until she realized something that had been supposed to be on her exposed collar was gone. Her rough breathing halted. Her line of sight darted about as she withdrew.

“Although I am your enemy, I admire your thirst for victory. You know not to give up.”

It was not something she should worry about in such circumstances. Nevertheless, her eyes searched for the brooch. She was unable to immediately find the object that twinkled, mismatched and beautiful, on top of the train.

“It is not... as if I wish to win. By winning this fight, there is not a single thing I would gain.” Violet spoke unwittingly fast. She should not let him realize that she was searching for something.

“Then what do you seek through fighting?”

“Nothing, it’s just that a situation in which I have to fight has been created. That’s why I do so. To me, fighting is living. If I lose, it only means I will die.”

“You’re saying there’s no emotion in that?”

“I do not know. I... know nothing about myself. I am a former soldier, but I do not remember anything from before becoming one. It might be late at this point, but I wonder... if it isn’t strange for me not to remember anything like this. I don’t know where I was born, whose child I am or what my name used to be. But, whether or not any of that has troubled me, I would say it never once did. That... That...” While speaking, Violet found the brooch. It bumped right against the chivalric leader’s feet.

He noticed it as well.

"That is because... I have been waiting for something that would cancel all of it out."

She pushed down and killed the feeling that she wanted to rush over to and take hold of.

"Just when I thought that the talk was getting long... so this is it?" The leader signaled for her to halt with his palm while picking it up. It was his first time seeing that it belonged to someone. "Is it something important?"

Would he throw it away if she nodded at that? Or would he give it back? Violet did not know. However, if she were in his shoes and had someone she must save and things she must do no matter what after that battle, doubtlessly, she would have to try imagining herself in his position in order to understand his thinking.

If she were him...

"Come get it!"

...that object would become a mere bait to attract her enemy, regardless of what kinds of feelings it was packed with.

The brooch was tossed into the air. Violet instantly broke into run. The chivalric leader's bayonet came at her. Violet aimed at his feet and flung the ballistic knife. Perhaps he had anticipated that much, as he repelled it as if outriding it. In that meantime, Violet grabbed the brooch. The gem floating in the night sky was the same as her Lord's eyes, which she had defined as the most beautiful thing in the world.

"Idiot!!"

She prevented an attack with her left arm, which was not the one gripping the brooch. As she lost her center of gravity due to consecutive blows, she fell back one, two, three steps. And then, finally, Violet's left arm broke apart, spewing out many of its parts. They were smashed and severed from her in a way that made them seem like scattering petals.

Thump, thump, thump. Violet felt her heartbeats echo unpleasantly in her

ears.

For some reason, time was flowing slowly. The chivalric leader swung down his saber while raising his voice as he spouted some sort of insult at her. Her back hit the train's scaffold. As he stepped on her stomach with his military shoe, she was unable to move. A few seconds thereafter, she would be skewered. Everything was unfolding, but it was as if it all were in slow motion.



Rather than the tip of the blade approaching her, Violet stared at the emerald brooch that she had not let go of until the very end. It was firmly grasped within her right hand. She had wanted to gaze into that green during her last moments were her eyes open while she was still alive.

Its shine was that person himself.

—*Major.*

He would not go anywhere anymore.

—*Major.*

They would not be apart anymore.

—*Major, I... lived.*

That made her extremely 'happy'.

—*Major, do you remember... that you embraced me when we first met? You had feared me for a long time. Beasts can sense that sort of fright very keenly. Even so, you kept me by your side. Most likely... I... definitely... had been thrown away because I would settle in the hands of anybody. Even so, I had wanted to be useful because you needed me. The days in which I was unable to see you were of continuous lacking, as well as experiences that seemed to give place to more of it. I had always wondered why you had told others to say that you had passed on. One day, should I have managed to meet you, I had wanted to reply to your question of "why can't you understand my feelings" and to the words "I love you". Major, was I... was your Violet... still loved by you?*

Rather than the sound of bones and flesh being severed, gunshots that seemed to cut through the wind ensued. The bayonet disappeared from Violet's line of sight. The arm of the chivalric leader was abruptly swung as if it were a toy, and he was kicked to the opposite direction.

Someone was fighting back.

The chivalric leader asked in shouts who the third person was, but did not receive an answer. The other silently drew his saber and shielded Violet. He then began to attack. At such way of handling a blade as he readied it and the back that she had always walked along with, Violet swallowed her breath.

“Violet, are you alive!?”

That voice was the exact one Violet would replay in her head as to not forget it. Her heartbeats reverberated intensely. Albeit forcefully, she raised her body.

The man cut down the squad leader with his saber and turned on his heels towards her with a frantic expression. Before her eyes was a person unlike how he used to be in the days that she had contact with him. His appearance had changed greatly from when the two of them had first met. However, there was one thing that remained intact: the fact that once blue and green orbs locked with one another, time would halt between them for just a little while. It was as if they meant to say, “Time, stand still. You are beautiful.”

Such was how things were from the very start.

“Major!”

From the very start, the two of them had been born to meet by chance in that manner.

Gilbert dashed towards Violet, supporting her frame. “Come, Violet.” He knelt down, and, after lifting her squatted body and carrying her sideways, he took off his sword belt and wrapped it around his arm. He then wrapped it around Violet’s. “I will... explain the circumstances later. There are many things that I want to apologize to you for. But for now, forgive what I’m going to do... Don’t ever let go.”

Violet recalled what she had been firmly grasping – the emerald brooch that she had retrieved hastily during the fight. She slowly unveiled her fingers and showed it to Gilbert. She then looked straight at him. While only he was reflected within that blue, her lips shaking, she was unable to muster any word out. She merely wished to inform him that she had kept the item.

Upon seeing the emerald brooch, Gilbert’s eyes distorted bitterly. “You... still had this?” His demeanor as he took the brooch from Violet’s palm and put it back on her as if to sew back together her blouse, which had been ripped on the chest area, was the same as of his past self.

“...jor.” She attempted to say something to him – anything would do. “Major!” However, the chivalric leader, who was supposed to be lying down, was trying

to stand up. Supported by one of his injured underlings, he pointed a large-caliber shotgun at them. “You dog of Leidenschaftlich...!” His neck bled with the blow from Gilbert’s blade. He spewed blood bubbles. “I’ll erase you! I’ll erase the two of you at once! You’re needless in this realm! Disappear from our world! Disappear! Disappear! Disappear!”

Either side would be unable to fight without receiving assistance. It was too late to convince the other party to put an end to the conflict. Neither could shrink back.

“Major, please leave me behind.” Violet said without hesitation. If releasing her and letting her fall to the ground would make things easier, since it was him, he would definitely be able to overcome the situation. That was what she believed.

“I told you not to let go.” Gilbert shook his head. His grip on Violet’s arm and torso grew even stronger. He then raised his other, prosthetic hand from above the train.

The chivalric leader laughed. He had most likely concluded that the embracing pair had chosen to die together.

“Major... then, please,” Violet gazed at her Lord, who was far more beautiful than the gem that she had been unceasingly protecting, “do not go anywhere.”

The shotgun was aimed at them.

“Please, stay by my side... I do not mind however you treat me. I simply want to be with you. That is all. Nothing else... is necessary. Major, I...”

She had learned how to write and could speak countless words, yet they would not properly come out in front of the person she truly cherished.

“...want to be together with you.”

The one standing there was not a doll. It was a girl who yearned for love from only one man.

“I’m not going anywhere... I need you. I’ll be by your side...!” Gilbert Bougainvillea answered the plea as if yelling.

It was because something other than a bullet had flown into their line of sight.

At twenty minutes past eight o'clock, Samuel LaBeouf, who worked as an engineer in the unfortunate intercontinental train, obeyed the command from the Leidenschaftlich colonel that had showed up like an electric shock and continued his task while waiting for the signal. What on Earth would said signal be? Even though he had been told that he would immediately know once he saw it, what should he do if he accidentally missed it?

Nevertheless, his worry was unnecessary. After all, an occurrence that would supposedly break the current situation in the deadlock awaited him.

An ostentatious blast arose, explosion lights scattering in the darkness of the night. At such a timing, a terrible catastrophe was happening ahead, in Ritorno village.

"What's that?! Stop, stop! Emergency stop!"

The station was on fire.

Back at seven hours and fifty minutes, an attractive young man with sandy blond hair and sky blue eyes was hanging up the phone with an "I got it". His outfit was slightly mismatched for the small assembly place of a desolate village.

"Benedict, what did President Hodgins say?" inquired a hard-faced, equipped man with black skin and a thinly shaved hairdo in the form of a crucifix, wearing a striped shirt and shoulder holsters.

"The old man is coming here. He gave us three orders. One: to lay waste to this village's station in a flashy way, so that it will be visible from the train heading towards it. Two: to aid the passengers and consequently rescue V. Three: to suppress that armed group as they will likely put up resistance. A contract has already been sealed by law. This land belongs to our company. He said it's okay to wreck it without hesitation. Everybody, let's go save V!"

During the convocation from Lux, who was in the headquarters, she had attempted to make the CH employees there congregated take guns. In response to that, everyone had started noisily frolicking as if they were in a festival.

Each of them had different ages and skin colors. They were the people Hodgins had gathered and described as "all weirdoes with their own

circumstances". The ones who had been called and rushed to that assembly spot were them – the postmen who made deliveries throughout the entire continent. It was unthinkable that they were about to participate in a dangerous rescue operation by an emergency order from their boss. Their attitude was closer to drunkards at a bar.

In contrast to them, a funeral-like atmosphere loomed over the villagers of Ritorno. It was only the expected, for a bizarre postal agency staff carrying weapons had suddenly informed them that their village's station would be destroyed.

Benedict walked over to the oldest woman in their midst, who was seated on a chair. "Granny, we'll make a bit of a fuss. If there are people amongst the villagers who can treat the wounded, I want you to bring them along if you can."

"You're already going to make me work?" It was an accusing manner of speech.

Benedict frowned. "You guys were convinced by our good-for-nothing President's words and sold this, right? Aren't you well-off, since every single person in this village is gonna be employed by our office? Granny, you're our colleague too. You're now a company employee, so of course we'll make you work. If you suspect we're deceiving you, you're wrong." With the click of his cross-shaped heels resounding, he stood in front of the village chief, abruptly bringing his face close to hers. "You're mistaking that with being protected. If that old man thinks about doing something, he can use some pretty awful methods. But he didn't do so and instead made proper negotiations, and also complied with the price discussions, right? The Old Man... the President treats people crudely, but he treasures his workers. Right now, we're on the move for the sake of an employee that he's super attached to as if she were his daughter. She's like a little sister to me too. We cherish her. So don't be so scared. Stand tall."

"That's right. The President definitely rewards hard work with payment and support. The industry will function here only in the future. At the outset, lifesaving will be our duty, Chief." Another postman added, as if to assist Benedict's rough persuasion.

“Are you really going to do this?”

“We are. Once it’s said we’ll do it, we definitely will. And if we’re beaten, we’ll do it over. That’s what our agency is about.”

“You don’t hate it, right?”

“Oh, what’s that? You can put on a strong face too?”

“I’m a woman born and raised in coalmines. What a foolish question.”

Even though a huge incident was about to begin, the air surrounding them was light, and everyone walked one after the other towards the station in a somewhat calm atmosphere. In spite of them having confronted the problem of how to break down the station, the chief offered the remaining coalmine explosives that were no longer used.

“Granny, you’re getting into it, huh?” Benedict gave the village chief a thumbs-up to show his gratitude.

However, there seemed to be several people with traumas prevent from detonations, and so most of the villagers were merely observing from afar and the postmen were the ones who installed the explosives.

“I... When I was born, the mine had already been closed, so it’s my first time seeing an explosion!”

Children making merry were the sole spectators that approached the area.

As he was caused to step back, Benedict commented, “Good for you.”

“I’m bad at dealing with adults, but this is amazing!”

“You’re bad with adults?”

“Before I was born, there was a blast in our coalmine and it’s still burning even now. And it’s said that a lot of people died in it. I’ve never seen my grandfathers. Both died from that.”

“Hmm...”

“It’s already been buried, yet it’s the only spot that doesn’t get covered by snow during the winter. It’s super hot. I can’t make too much fun of it when I think about how my grandpas are probably down there, though. It’s better not

to be a coal miner, but I don't like being poor either."

"Is that so...?" Benedict put a hand on the head of the child that attempted to continue speaking and ruffled his hair. He looked one more time at the village chief, who was sitting on a chair that someone had arranged for her.

"Are the preparations done?"

"Yeah."

"This is importunate of me, but your President really will compensate us plenty for this matter, won't he...? I've gotten worried. Although this is lifesaving... our station might be just one of the train's passage points, but if it gets destroyed, Leidenschaftlich most likely won't stay quiet."

"I'm telling you not to fret, aren't I?" Benedict put a hand on his hip, and after a brief moment, he laughed mockingly. It was probably because the person in question had surfaced in his mind. "He's incredible. When he gotta do something, he does it. He's a good man. So be at ease." He said reassuringly.

"Is that true...? I sold the village because surviving our winter would cost us a lot... I want the children leaving this place as immigrants to build their own lives, too. Your job will be the last straw of this favor. I will probably be able to meet your President eventually, but you tell him as well."

"It's okay. I'll talk to him too."

"I'm counting on you." A smile appeared on her wrinkle-covered face. Surely, there were wrinkles that she had acquired not simply from aging, but from numerous hardships.

"Granny," Benedict raised a thumb, "you're a woman of the coalmines, right? Don't get scared of some big fireworks. I like strong women."

"Kids shouldn't talk so haughtily." The village chief laughed. Perhaps due to laughing too much, tears formed thinly in the corners of her eyes.

A while thereafter, a flicker was ignited on the fuse line. The way it danced in the middle of the night was like a blaze serpent.

At Benedict's call, everyone started the countdown, "Five, four, three, two, one!"

Heat, wind and blares surged and overwhelmed the people present. Hot gusts and shock waves burst up, the women letting out screams. The rail flew away and the station's building collapsed, covered in flames. It was a spectacular sight. Still, what an occurrence. Like a flower blooming in the evening, the destruction was somewhat beautiful. Long accustomed to explosions, the elderly ladies clapped their hands, the children wept, and the CH postal service's personnel cheered while blowing whistles. Each then took back their weapons.

"It might be late to say this, but that doesn't seem like a job postmen should be doing."

"Well, it's fine from time to time, right? Considering my previous occupation, I would never refuse a request from the President, since he brought me back into decency."

"Are we decent, though? By the way, are we gonna receive any bonuses for going through this danger?"

"It's sweltering. Shouldn't we extinguish that fire before the rescue? Benedict, hey, Leader."

"Y'all are noisy. Listen. Make sure you don't get mistaken and shot by the army. No accidental shootings, either. Friendly fire is the worst. Don't get carried away and do anything radical. Also, put on the identifier. If any of you find V, tell me immediately. She'll get a lecture for giving us this trouble. Anyways, our main objective is V!"

The train's sounds could be heard in the distance.

Benedict wrapped a red cloth around his arm. "Welp, after the fireworks, comes the festival." With his pistols ready, he licked his lips.

At twenty minutes past eight o'clock, the after-effects of the massive explosion also reached Violet and Gilbert. Scattering light and flames soared like flowers from within the pitch-darkness ahead. A part of the station's roof, which had been blown up, came flying and directly struck the backs of the chivalric leader and his subordinate. The trigger was pulled, yet the bullet disappeared into the wrong direction. As the two had not been prepared to

even hold themselves in place, with expressions of surprise, they hit the car frame and rolled down. Violet had instantly attempted to offer her hand to them as they crossed her side, but such arm was the damaged one.

“Violet, don’t let go!”

Gilbert endured the impact until the train completely came to a stop while supporting Violet. He could catch the screams of the passengers. The train stopped without turning over, just barely about to collide with the station.

Without a moment’s delay, gunshots could be heard. A smoke curtain was leaking out of the train’s front. Members of Leidenschaftlich’s Special Offense Force were beginning to take control of it by seizing the opportunity, as Gilbert had. Additionally, while avoiding obstacles in the station, not just one but several motorcycles leaped towards the train. To say they were leaping was an odd manner of speech, but there was no helping it since it was happening in the literal sense. They were coming both as single riders and in pairs, but there was one thing all of them had in common.

“Everyone who wants to run away, come here!”

They were employees of the CH Postal Service. Taking advantage of the commotion, they rode the motorcycles that were normally used for delivering letters and started guiding those who were trying to escape towards the direction of the village. Amongst them was a strong man who snipped back at the hijackers that were shooting intensely through the window glasses. It was Violet’s colleague, Benedict. The other Leidenschaftlich battalion, which acted as reinforcement to the rescue, made its appearance as well.

Gilbert exhaled a sigh at the sight before him. So did Violet. It seemed that all the measures to protect the passengers were working finely.

In their peace of mind, the two were petrified for a while. After all, the scene was frighteningly whimsical. Ashes, sparks and fire flashes dissipated through the wind in the darkness of the sky, dancing as they rained down.

Gilbert took off the sword belt he had tied around Violet. He then striped the jacket of his battle uniform and put it over her shoulders. “Violet.”

It seemed dangerous to get down in such conditions. The next action Gilbert

was supposed to take was to contour the turmoil and entrust Violet to the rescuing team of postmen. He also had to return to the battle and help suppress the chaos.

“Major.”

“Violet, listen.”

“I’ll land you a hand, so you have to get up.” was what he had been about to say, but the words retreated to the back of his throat as he looked at her.

Violet’s eyes flickered. The tears she had accumulated seemed about to flood even now.

“Major...” She steadfastly held onto her chest area, where her brooch rested on.

Gilbert Bougainvillea was right in front of her eyes. Just that fact made the sound of her heartbeats loud in a way not even the battlefield could manage.

“I will fight too. You have come to save the civilians, right?” Perhaps because she had always been disciplining herself into being as a machine, Violet attempted to be of use to Gilbert even in such circumstances.

“You’re a part of them.”

“I am... Major’s... tool.”

“You’re no tool. You, who I am to protect, should not fight. That duty is mine as the Colonel of Leidenschaftlich’s army, Gilbert Bougainvillea. It is also the job of my subordinates. Violet, I will deliver you to a safe spot now.”

Violet’s face was of someone who had received a blow. “Colonel... Major... Colonel... Gil... bert.”

“I don’t mind being called ‘Major’.”

“Ma... j... Gilbert...” Violet wound up hiding her face with her right hand. Tears traveled down the gaps between her fingers.

She was currently ‘sad’.

“If... I am not a tool, why... did you say you would not let go...?”

Being told that he would not to let go had made her ‘contented’. However,

being denied of her own reason of existence was 'sorrowful'. If he had showed himself to her once again, why would he not allow her to go back to being a tool? In Violet's perspective, she was aware that her value lay only within violence.

"Violet."

As she forever swayed between being a tool and a person, at that moment, Gilbert attempted once again to convey something to the girl who did not know love.

"I made your life a mess. I let you go to war. I hurt you. I regretted it so much that I thought of killing myself. Yet I knew that you had always been searching for me. Even though I had decided to protect you from afar, today, I couldn't hold back and ended up coming. I am... not the sort of man you take me to be. Not a magnificent lord, nor an honorable individual. I'm definitely not worthy of you."

That his love would not run out, no matter what she was, wherever she was living or even if she were a fool.

"Still, even now, I love you as a person. To me, you're not a tool."

"Even... if I... am not... a tool...?"

"I am not your master anymore, either. Regardless, I want you to let me stay by your side."

Silence.

"Violet?"

Violet allowed something that seemed to fiercely burn her throat to pass through. Her tears were feverish. They were proof of her feelings, which she had only shed a number of times that could be counted with one hand in her life.

The first time she had cried had been when she used to be a girl soldier. She was a young female tool with beautiful eyes of gem-like blue irises and golden lashes.

"I..."

Her current self no longer had the same stature as when she and Gilbert had first met. Neither was her appearance the same as when she had been to the battlefields. Her hair had grown lengthier and she had become the graceful and dignified young woman who now stood before him. With the grown-up figure of the girl he had loved, as the existence whose hand he had let go of, she now stood before Gilbert.

“I...”

After a few years had gone by, she had finally arrived at the place where she would be able to transmit her feelings.

“Had not understood at first... the meaning of Major leaving me, handing me over to the Evergarden couple, and entrusting me to President Hodgins. Or the reason you had told me to become free. I merely... wondered all the while about why you had not discarded me, despite the fact I was not needed. I did not understand... any of your feelings, Major. Even now, Major, despite you telling me this, I find myself thinking that I am better off as a tool. I... I am the one... who is not worthy of you, Major... My existence is... like some kind of failed product that was created by mistake. That is why the thoughts of people, too... But...”

Large teardrops streamed from her blue eyes. They trailed along her chin, pouring onto her emerald brooch.

“I have become able to somewhat feel. With this new life, which Major granted me, it was only little by little, but I have become able to understand. The sadness and joy... pride, fear, everything... that someone can feel towards another person... I do not fathom those as my own, however. But through writing on others’ behalf, and through the people I meet, I can feel them. Major, I... gradually... have also come to understand... the things you say.”

The things he had said. The things he had told her about.

“If I... had done more for you when you were younger, I wonder if you would have interest in these things.”

“Even if... you think that... to me, you are...”

“Do you... want my orders that much?”

“Why... do you think of everything as an order no matter what?! Do you... really believe I see you as a tool? If that were the case, I would not have held the little you in my arms or made sure that no one would mess with you as you grew up! Regardless of anything, you don’t realize... how I feel... about you. Normally... anyone would... surely understand. The reason why I’m angry and why I’m suffering is you. Still, you don’t comprehend a single fraction of that.”

“Do you not have feelings? That’s not it, right? It’s not as if you have none. Isn’t that right? If you don’t have feelings, then what is this expression? You can make a face like that, can’t you? You have feelings. You have... a heart just like mine, right!?”

“To love is... to think that you... want to protect someone the most in the world.”

“You’re important... and precious. I don’t ever want you to be hurt. I want you to be happy. I want you to be well. That’s why, Violet... you should live on and become free. Escape from the military and live your life. You’ll be fine even if I’m not around. Violet, I love you. Please live.”

“I have come... to understand them.” Before she realized, her voice had deflated as if withering. Her field of vision was blurring as well. Tears continued to spill from Violet’s blue eyes. The lips that used to say she did not understand feelings mustered different words, “I understand... ‘I love you’... a little as well.”

She did not understand everything yet. Nevertheless, without denying any of it, she meant to understand it from then on. The motive behind her intention of making such efforts was being told that she was loved by Gilbert Bougainvillea.

Gilbert’s chest was tight with the emotions going rampant in it. A thin film of tears spread in his eyes from grief and delight.

“Violet.” Gilbert stretched his hand out.

His fingertips halted halfway. He had suddenly become afraid of touching her body – something he had had no time to feel just a moment before since he, in order to protect her, had held onto her with deathly desperation.

Would she accept him? She was Gilbert’s tool no more. Neither was she a small child. He could not touch her so easily.

Violet Evergarden – one living being, the only woman he loved in the world – stood there. It was Gilbert’s first time ever loving someone. He used not to know the intricacies of loving and being loved.

Within the sounds of battle that suited the two of them, something was finally commencing.



Gilbert adored her crying figure so much he could not help himself. "Violet, I want to wipe your tears."

At the request, Violet hid her face within her hand even more. Surely she disliked being seen weeping. In her own reasoning, she dreaded the possibility of being hated by the man in front of her through any and each one of her actions. She instinctively assumed that, although love was something gentle, it was also fragile.

"Violet, please. Show me your face. No matter what form you take, my feelings towards you won't change." As she did not look his way, Gilbert said while laughing shyly, "See, I'm on the verge of crying too."

In truth, his tears were already pouring. He was unable to poise himself. There was no stopping them. Tears formed and fell, formed and fell. Just as his feelings for her, they could not be impeded.

"Violet."

Violet's body shuddered as her name was called – just called – by him.

"It's fine if it's little by little. If you... are coming... to understand it, I will wait any amount of time. Little by little is okay. I won't... pry for an answer immediately. Until you say 'I understand'... I will wait however long it takes... only for you. Today, I'd wanted to tell you 'I love you' once again, but it's not as if I had desired anything from you in return."

His tears wound up spilling once again.

"I... will not steal from you anymore, and I don't wish to do anything other than give. If, one day, you ever come to think that you 'understood', I want you to accept my love. Violet." The man said to the sobbing girl, who attempted to suppress her tears with her artificial arm, "I love you. Let me dry your tears."

The one behind the wrist that he took hold of and moved away was not a taciturn, expressionless and truly machine-like Auto-Memories Doll. Instead, it was a human child who was crying out of slight happiness and fear from receiving the 'number one' form of love from someone for the first time.

Gilbert embraced Violet, who shed tears while trembling, after slowly caressing her cheeks. "I've always wanted to do this." He whispered as more

tears overflowed.

“Violet, I love you.”

‘Auto-Memories Doll’. It had been a long time since such name had caused a scandal.

The creator was the researcher of mechanical dolls, Professor Orland. His wife, Molly, was a novelist, and all had started once she had posteriorly lost her sight. After becoming a blind woman, Molly was extremely depressed for being unable to write novels, which was the meaning of her life, and had grown weaker with each day. Unable to bear seeing such a thing, Professor Orland had built the first Auto-Memories Doll. It was meant for processing everything said by the voice of its established master, as well as writing down words said by human voices – in other words, a machine that served for ‘amanuensis’.

Although he had only meant to make one for his beloved wife, it had later become well-known with the support of a great amount of people. Currently, Auto-Memories Dolls were sold at a reasonably low price, and there were types that could be rented or borrowed.

Those who worked with amanuensis were referred to as ‘Auto-Memories Dolls’ around the world. It was a profession revered by many since ancient times.

In the industry that dealt with Auto-Memories Dolls, there was a particularly famous individual. Her voice had a sweet ring to it and matched her beauty. She was a female Auto-Memories Doll with golden hair and blue eyes.

Her workplace was CH Postal Service from a grandiose southern country, Leidenschaftlich. It was a notorious company, which had received awarding from the Army Ministry for its cooperation in resolving the hijacking incident of a certain train. The young president of CH Postal Service had been featured in the newspapers of the time bringing supplies to the scene. The postmen had worked to rescue the passengers. A brunette of impressive beauty had wailed while hugging the wounded and wrapping them in blankets.

The company had had several photos of it published, but it was not as if they had any connection to her popularity. If anything, to say that the company was

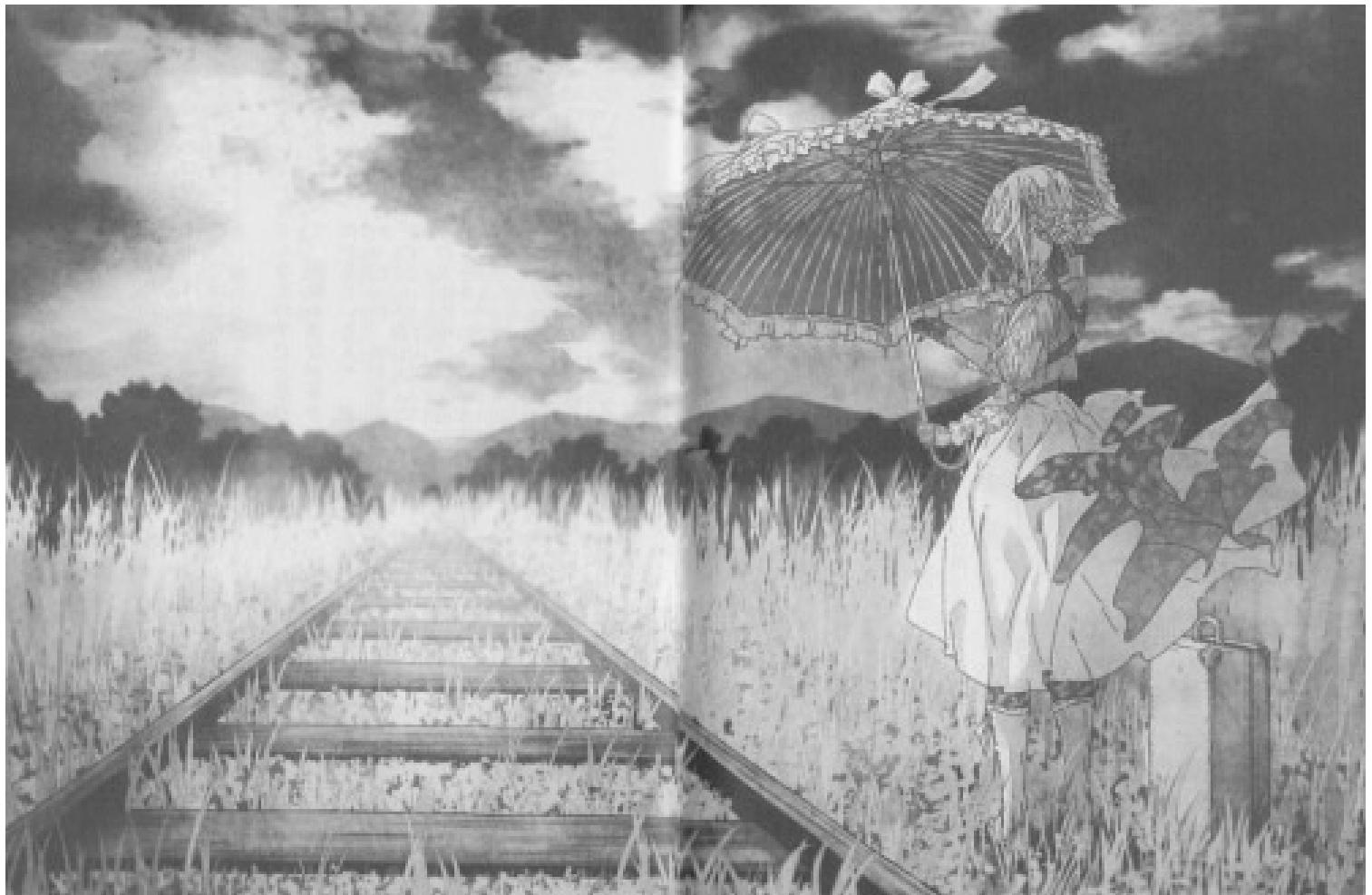
known because she was part of it was more accurate. Stamps with the name of the flower that she had been named after were best-selling items out of the ones produced by CH Postal Service. From one person to another, the rumors about her knew not where to stop.

Exactly what kind of being was she, you ask? The impressions from those who had actually met her were many. Some would say her voice was pleasant. Some would say her handwriting was pretty. Some would say their hearts were saved by her. Some would praise her charms by claiming they had been bewitched by her.

Have you become interested in requesting her services? I shall tell you how to hire her. If you wish to meet her, all you must do is give a call. If you search in a telephone book for a postal company in the name of 'Hodgins', you should be able to find it right away. Most likely, a young woman with a still childish and intellectual manner of speech will immediately hear your requirements through the phone. When inquired if you have preference for any Auto-Memories Doll, say her name. You might be left in the waiting list, but an Auto-Memories Doll who is worth waiting for shall be sent to you in the future. As long as a customer wishes, she will appear anywhere anytime.

"I rush to wherever my clients might desire. I am from the Auto-Memories Doll service, Violet Evergarden."

She was but a slightly strange girl.



Afterword

Dear whomever it may concern, it has been a while. Have you been well?

Time sure does fly. In case there were many events of any sort during the meantime that we have not been in touch, I truly hope they have made you strong and not just lonely.

Have you reflected on what kind of girl Violet is? Compared to your life, whether the difficulties and joys were a lot or a few, hers was definitely different. It is the life of someone else, after all. There is not a single thing that can be defined as right. If you ask me, “Then, what is it that you wanted to do? What message did you want to give through her?”, I simply wanted to say, “I am cheering for you”. This book is merely one of the several others you have stumbled upon in the life that you star. Still, I am cheering for whoever goes, “Regardless, I will live on”.

I am someone who gets hurt and cries often, but those who have upset me and who I have upset are people. Similarly, those who heal me are also people, so no matter how much I cry, I cannot hate humans. After all, I started writing upon thinking, “Guess I will go live by myself”, but in the end, I only somehow succeeded because numerous people lent me a hand. Even if I come to hate myself, it is hard to do the same with others.

I have no idea what kind of future I will live from now on, but I want to become sympathetic even if I am wounded. It is said that we repeatedly hurt and are hurt, and then gradually become compassionate. I do not wish to recite anything self-important, but instead be a bit gentler to someone other than myself. I want to become someone a little – a tad – better before I die. In my day-by-day, I keep thinking, “Isn’t that something very important?”. That is why I am cheering. But there are also times when we get tired and want to close our eyes for eternity, aren’t there? Many things in life can be infuriating. During those times, please rest. I do so as well.

Do you remember what I had said previously? Yes, that is right! Let’s do our best together.

Lastly, the countless people who have supported the blue-eyed girl Violet have my gratitude. To the editor that assisted me in delivering this work to the world, the various employees of Kyoto Animation, the bookshops that sell this piece, my friends and family, and you, the reader, thank you very much. I pray you discover a tiny bit of kindness when you look around the world after closing this book.